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FT413

Christmas

2021

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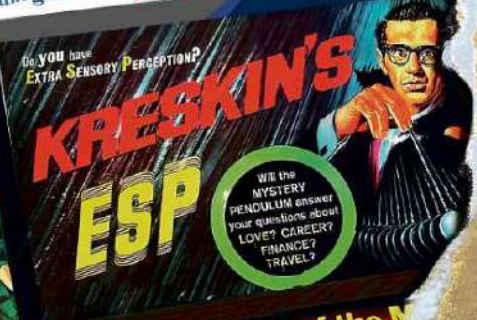
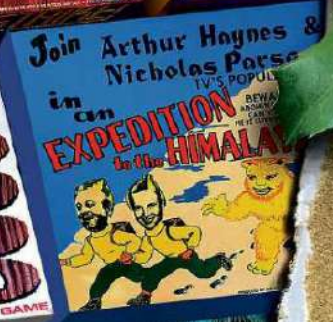
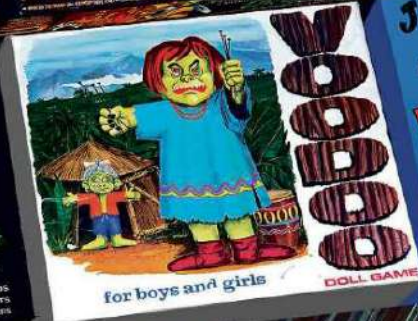
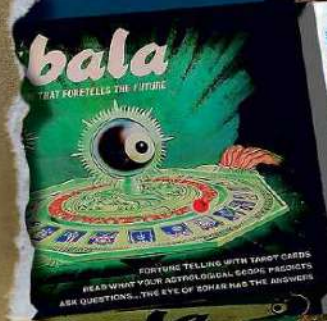
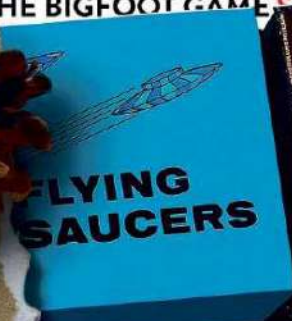
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BIZARRE BOARD GAMES

URI GELLER'S STRIKE! NESSIE HUNT ATMOSFEAR VOICE OF THE MUMMY

FLYING SAUCERS MYSTIC SKULL SCREAM INN KA-BAL A GHOST

THE BIGFOOT GAME



32

GALS AND GHOULS READ

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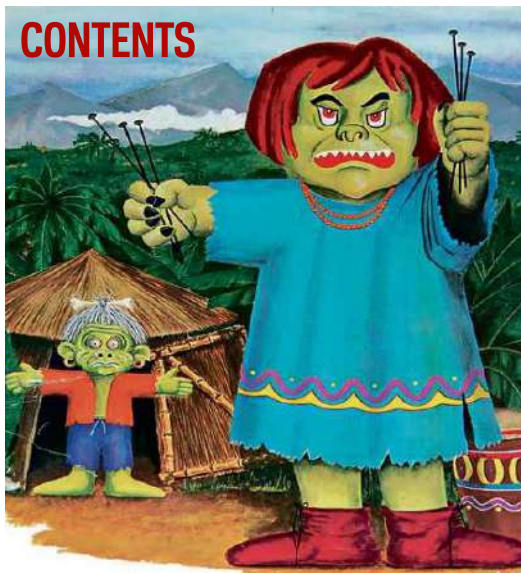
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CONTENTS



30 Fortean board games – from Nessie Hunt to Uri Geller's Strike!



42 Feasts and follies



53 Celebrating Saturnalia



74 Monsieur Pernelet and his crocodiles



FORTEAN TIMES 413

Why fortean?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

SEE PAGE
76

STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: gender reveal fails, needle panics, MAGA Moonies, Dr Dee's mirror & much more..

12 ARCHÆOLOGY

14 SCIENCE

16 GHOSTWATCH

20 ALIEN ZOO

22 THE CONSPIRASPHERE

28 THE UFO FILES

FEATURES

30 COVER STORY

A SHORT HISTORY OF FORTEAN BOARD GAMES

From the Ouijmania of the 1920s to pop-cultural products featuring everyone from Bigfoot and Nessie to Kreskin and Uri Geller, fortean board games have a fascinating history. **REV PETER LAWS** celebrates the Games of Christmas Past.

42 "THE STOMACH RULES THE WORLD"

FRANK GONZALEZ-CRUSSI pays tribute to His Digestive Majesty and explores the history of eccentric and excessive eating.

46 THE WANDERING STONES OF STREATLEY

In lockdown, with travel restricted, pubs shut and socialising banned, **LISA GLEDHILL** decided to try to crack a local mystery – where exactly are all the Streatley Sarsen Stones?

SERIES

50 STRANGE STATESMEN

Green Ink **SD TUCKER**

64 HAUNTED GENERATION

A festive round-up of popular hauntology **BOB FISCHER**

74 PECULIAR POSTCARDS

Monsieur Pernelet and his crocodiles **JAN BONDESON**

FORUM

53 Celebrating Saturnalia **MATT SALUSBURY**

54 The Seventies: Ufology's Golden Age **NIGEL WATSON**

REGULARS

02 EDITORIAL

57 REVIEWS

69 LETTERS

76 READER INFO

79 PHENOMENOMIX

80 STRANGE DEATHS

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ETIENNE GILFILLAN

A ROMAN FEAST, BY ROBERTO
BOMPIANI: J PAUL GETTY
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EDITORIAL



THE GAMES OF CHRISTMAS PAST

Welcome to our special Christmas issue!

In keeping with the season, it's a massive and barely digestible feast of festive oddities and high-calorie strangeness. The main course will be a trip down memory lane for many readers, as FT's resident man of the cloth, Rev Peter Laws, shows off his massive pile of vintage presents and unwraps the fortean games of Christmas Past (p30).

There's a long tradition of elements of forteana cross-fertilising with popular culture; we tend to think particularly of cinema and television, but as Peter's wide-ranging survey of the field reveals, the humble board game has a long history of taking up the fortean hot topics of the day and turning them into brightly-coloured, dice-rolling exercises in family fun. From the fascinating history of the Ouija board – and its numerous offspring dedicated to spirit communication or psychic powers – to the later popularity of games based on UFOs, ghosts and celebrated cryptids (like Milton Bradley's splendid *Big Foot: The Giant Snow Monster Game*, pictured above), there would appear to be a game for nearly every fortean occasion.

Elsewhere, we invite you to ready yourself for the carousing and gluttony of the holiday period by joining Mat Salusbury to celebrate the Roman festival of Saturnalia (p53), a possible precursor of Christmas (but with added dwarf fights). In an extract from his new book about the weird human body (p42), Professor Frank Gonzalez-Crussi focuses on His Digestive Majesty, the stomach: but as he points out, it's an organ that has been tested and abused through centuries of gourmandising, from the over-the-top banquets of the ancient

world to the hot dog eating contests of Coney Island. David Hambling (p14) looks at stories of intoxicated animals – from inebriated elk to drunken elephants – and asks if there's any truth in them. And if you're feeling a bit queasy after all that, Barry Baldwin (p19) is on hand with a brief history of vomiting in the classical world – *sic(k) transit gloria mundi*, indeed. All this plus wandering sarsen stones, vintage ufology, needle panics, gender reveal disasters and gun-toting Moonies. Happy Christmas!

A PHENOMENAL OPPORTUNITY

It won't be home for Christmas, but we're sure you'll still want to treat yourself or a loved one to Hunt Emerson's collection of Phenomenomix cartoon strips plucked from these very pages. The book is being funded via a kickstarter campaign. Head to p68 for further details, and visit <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/h-e/phenomenomix> to sign up before 8 Dec.



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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

NIGHTCLUB NEEDLE PANIC

Fearful clubbers report being injected with drugs and blacking out

With the start of the new university term this autumn, we have seen the return of a classic forteen phenomenon – mysterious needle attacks. There has been a wave of reports that people in nightclubs have been injected with drugs that cause them to black out, causing sufficient concern that the Home Secretary Priti Patel and the Commons Home Affairs Committee have asked to be kept informed of developments.

The most prominently reported incident involved Zara Owen, 19, who visited a nightclub in Nottingham on 10 October and blacked out shortly after arriving, despite apparently drinking less than usual. The next thing she says she remembers is waking up in her bed with a pain in her leg. On examining her leg, she found a mark that looked like a pinprick, causing her to conclude that she had been injected with something. She said: “As a young person who’s at university, I’m hearing stories of people who have been to nightclubs and they have been injected... so this kind of gave me an idea this had happened to me.” Another student, who wished to remain anonymous, said she felt a “pinch on the back of her arm” as she was leaving another Nottingham nightclub, then blacked out, leading her to believe that she, too, had been injected with a drug. In all, Nottinghamshire police have received 12 reports from nightclubbers who believed they had been injected with a drug on a night out in the city, having experienced blackouts



Examining her leg, she found a mark that looked like a pinprick

and memory loss and feeling a pinch or finding a mark on their bodies. None, though, had actually seen an assailant, or

usual. As well as in Nottingham, incidents have been reported from London, Birmingham, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Dundee, Glasgow, Exeter and Liverpool, although police do not see these incidents as linked and Merseyside Police said they could find no evidence “that any criminality occurred”. Some forces, though, have said they are considering deploying plainclothes officers in nightclubs to combat the threat. There has been a call for a one-day boycott of nightclubs in protest, clubbers have taken to going out in thick denim to make it harder for needles to pierce their clothes and there has been a petition calling for nightclubs to physically search everyone entering.

Those with drug expertise, however, are sceptical about the reports. David Caldicott, an emergency medicine consultant and founder of drug testing project WEDINOS, said: “The technical and medical knowledge required to perform this would make it deeply improbable. It’s really hard to stick a needle in someone without them noticing, especially if you have to keep the needle in there for long enough, maybe 20 seconds, to inject enough drugs to cause this,” adding that “it is at the level of a state-sponsored actor incapacitating a dissident, like the Novichok incident (see FT365:2, 5; 366:5, 14). The idea that a clubber would do this to a fellow clubber seems highly unlikely to me.” Guy Jones, senior scientist at drugs charity the Loop, agreed, saying that any drug capable of creating the effects reported, such as GHB, which has a reputation as a “date rape” drug, would need to be administered in large quantities with thick needles and would be easily detectable

ABOVE: Nightclubs have reopened, but clubbers are reporting attacks with needles. LEFT: Zara Owen believes that she was injected with a mystery drug.

a syringe, nor were there any witnesses to the alleged attacks. Victims have reported being injected in the hand, the leg and in at least one case, in Liverpool, the back. Nottinghamshire Police did arrest two men in relation to the alleged offences after they were seen acting suspiciously in the city centre and they are on conditional bail while investigations continue, but as yet police have not announced that they have concrete evidence, beyond possessing drugs, that would link the men to needle attacks.

Similar reports have been received from across the country in recent weeks, perhaps explained by the return of student life after lockdown, with new students being potentially unwary because pandemic restrictions mean they have had less clubbing experience than



MEDIAEVAL DEAD

Pandemics and post-mortem survival

PAGE 16



ALIEN INSECTS

Cannibal butterflies and other horrors

PAGE 21



UFO CROSS THE MERSEY

Is Liverpool really a saucer hot-spot?

PAGE 29



ABOVE LEFT: The London Monster attacks a young lady. ABOVE RIGHT: Sure protection against the Piqueur in an 1820 cartoon.

for days after in a toxicology screening. They said it was far more likely the women have had their drinks spiked and then injured themselves while under the drug's influence.

Attacks like these have a long history, going back to at least the 18th century. A classic of the genre is the story of "The London Monster", who terrorised young women on the streets of the capital in 1790, slashing their petticoats and wounding them in the buttocks or thighs with a sharp instrument. In this case, exhaustively chronicled by FT's Jan Bondeson in his 2004 book *The London Monster* (and in FT391:32-37), an arrest and prosecution followed, but later examples of phantom stabbers and the panics that ensued have proven tougher to solve.

The French "Piqueur" panic of 1819 involved reports of women being stabbed in the buttocks and thighs by needles, rapidly escalating to claims of attacks with poisoned needles. This spread to other major French cities including Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille and Calais – and abroad to Brussels and Augsburg – before the panic died down in early

1820, although there were brief resurgences in 1822 and 1823. In the 1910s, in the US, there was a widespread belief that "needle men" were injecting vulnerable young women in nightclubs with drugs such as morphine, or even exotic South American arrow poisons, so they could abduct them into a life of prostitution, a legend that persisted well into the 1930s without anyone actually being caught committing such acts. In Italy, in 1932, Trieste was gripped with fear of the "Man-Wasp", a mysterious individual who was allegedly stabbing women in the buttocks with a needle, resulting in several men nearly getting lynched and one enterprising individual trying to patent under-skirt armour. "Man-Wasp" panics recurred across Italy in various cities until at least 1941, by which time Italians had more pressing things to worry about. In the 1980s and 1990s, there were persistent rumours of people being given AIDS as a result of being pricked with pins coated in HIV-infected blood, again in

nightclubs. These morphed into viral emails and social media posts once Internet use became more widespread, despite the US Center for Disease Control investigation finding no evidence that any attacks had ever taken place. More recently, in 2015, there was a spate of needle attack reports from India, again without any assailants or syringes being found. Just as the rumours of HIV-infected pins probably had their roots in advice to drug addicts not to share needles because of the risk of cross-infection, it may be that the current fear of being injected with drugs in nightclubs has its roots in warnings about the very real threat of "spiked" drinks – with the "spike" taking on a literal form. For other phantom attackers, see also FT131:32-38, 148:8-9, 163:7, 164:6, 310:40-41 and Michael Goss, *The Halifax Slasher: An Urban Terror in the North of England*, Fortean Times Occasional Paper, 1987. *BBC News*, *Guardian*, 19 Oct; *mirror.co.uk*, 20 Oct; *dailymail.co.uk*, 21 +24 Oct 2021.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

MISSING WALLABY LAST SEEN AT PUB AFTER FLEEING PETTING ZOO

Eve. Standard, 23 Sept 2021.

Retired police officer arrested and held in jail over violent dream

Shropshire Star, 6 Oct 2021.

SHAPE-SHIFTING TRAIN SEATS TO COAX BACK COMMUTERS

D.Telegraph, 2 July 2021.

Six ghosts stolen from York in night-time raid

yorkmix.com, 23 Sept 2021.

DATING SKELETAL REMAINS FROM CORK PUB COULD TAKE MONTHS

Irish Examiner, 28 Apr 2021.

SIDELINES...

FINDING YOURSELF

After drinking with friends in Bursa province, Turkey, Beyhan Mutulu, 50, wandered off into a forest and did not return. His worried wife and friends alerted local authorities and a search party set out into the forest, where Mutulu later bumped into them and decided to join in. He took part in the search for several hours before members of the party started calling out his name and he replied: "I am here!" When taken aside by a police officer for a statement he said: "Don't punish me too harshly, officer. My father will kill me." *BBC News, 1 Oct 2021.*

MAMMON

During a four-day telethon, a right-wing evangelical pastor claimed Jesus has not yet returned because people aren't donating enough money to their churches, saying: "I honestly believe this – the reason why Jesus hasn't come is because people are not giving the way God told them to give; when you understand this, you can speed up the time." *indy199.com, 27 Sept 2021.*

REDUNDANT WIZARD

After 23 years on the council payroll, Ian Channell, 88, has been made redundant from his NZ\$16,000 (£8,200) a year post as official wizard of the city of Christchurch, New Zealand. His job was to provide "acts of wizardry" and promote the city. He has performed rain dances, taken part in protests against the destruction of heritage buildings and been declared a living work of art by the New Zealand Art Gallery Directors Association. Now the city council has deemed that he no longer fits "the vibes" of the city, saying it is going in a more modern and diverse direction. "They are a bunch of bureaucrats who have no imagination," said Mr Channell. *BBC News, 15 Oct 2021.*



MARTIN ROSS

GENDER REVEAL FAILS

Boy, girl... or trail of death and disaster?



BELOW: The unfortunate Christopher Pekny, taken out by a home-made pipe bomb before the party even started.

Since 2011 or thereabouts, parties at which parents dramatically reveal the biological sex of their unborn children have become increasingly popular in the US. Originally fairly modest, involving cakes that were revealed to be pink or blue when cut, or releases of coloured balloons, the actual reveals have become ever more spectacular as time has passed. The skills of the party hosts, however, have not always matched their ambition, with what some would say are predictable results. One such party fail resulted in Anthony Spinelli of Kingston, New Hampshire, being fined for disorderly conduct after he decided the best way to reveal the sex of his forthcoming child was to detonate 80lb (36kg) of Tannerite, an explosive normally used as a target for firearms practice and sold over the counter in the US. Despite choosing a secluded quarry for his child's explosive debut, the detonation led to minor structural damage to local houses and reports to police of an explosion from across a wide area of New Hampshire and Massachusetts. At least in this case, no one died.

Not so lucky was Christopher Pekny, 28, of Liberty, New York. He did not even get as far as the party. He was preparing for a



"It was the freakiest of freak accidents that I could imagine"

spectacular reveal by building what was essentially a powerful pipe bomb, which exploded prematurely, killing Pekny and seriously injuring his brother Michael. Their younger brother Peter told the *New York Times* that it was "the freakiest of freak accidents that I could ever imagine," but regrettably it was not completely unprecedented.

Only two weeks before, Evan Thomas Silver, 26, had been killed by a piece of shrapnel that struck his chest when a small cannon fired at a gender reveal party in

Michigan burst, and in 2019 Iowa grandmother Pamela Kreimeyer died instantly when a chunk of metal from a gender reveal explosion hit her head.

The force of the blast was so strong that the piece of metal ended up 144 yards (132m) away. However, a teenage father-to-be in Chapel Hill, Tennessee, had a lucky escape: he was struck in the crotch by debris from a hand-held smoke cannon but avoided serious injury.

Further fatal gender reveal mayhem took place in Nichupte Lagoon off Cancun, Mexico, where the climax of a gender reveal boat party was meant to be the flypast of a plane trailing a banner saying, "It's a girl!"; but the plane nose-dived into the bay, for as yet undetermined reasons, killing both the pilot and co-pilot. The crew of another plane were lucky to escape with their lives when it crashed near the town of Turkey in Texas, close to the Oklahoma border. They had been carrying out a low-altitude flight to drop 350 gallons (1,325 litres) of pink water for a gender reveal when the sudden loss of weight following the liquid being released caused the plane to stall, slam into the ground and flip over. The crew suffered only minor injuries.

Gender reveals have been responsible for at least two major



Amazingly, one gender reveal that went off without a hitch was staged in Florida by Stacie Childs-Wright and her husband Chad Wright. This involved their pet alligator, Amos, biting into a balloon to release a cloud of pink powder.

US wildfires. In Tucson, Arizona, father-to-be Dennis Dickey decided that the best way to reveal his child's sex was to blow up a Tannerite target, despite the dry conditions in the area. The explosion ignited a fire that destroyed 45,000 acres (182km²) of the Green Valley National Forest and caused at least \$8 million of damage. The El Dorado forest fire in California in 2020 also resulted from a gender reveal explosion, burning 22,000 acres (89km²) and killing a firefighter, resulting in the unhappy couple Refugio Manuel Jimenez Jr and Angela Renee Jimenez being charged with involuntary manslaughter. These make the gender reveal fail in Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada, look positively restrained. There, a misfiring

device that was meant to produce a cloud of coloured smoke exploded instead and burned half a hectare (1.2 acres) of forest, resulting in a \$600 fine for the family. And just to show that the

US doesn't have a monopoly on gender reveal madness, Samuel Montesalvo decided to make the reveal by doing a tyre-spinning burnout on a road in Australia's Gold Coast using special blue smoking tyres. Unfortunately, this also set fire to the car and Montesalvo and his passenger had to be rescued by bystanders. He ended up being charged with dangerous operation of a motor vehicle, fined AUS \$1,000 (£543) and banned from driving for six months.

However, the person credited with starting the gender reveal

craze back in 2008, Jenna Karvunidis, now regrets doing so, saying: "It's all become a bit of a nightmare." She added that she felt responsible and cried after hearing of the El Dorado fire. On viewing clips of extravagant reveals, including the alligator, she said: "People should definitely stop doing that... I think a lot of people out there are searching for likes on the Internet and it has caused a lot of problems, people should be a little bit more responsible with the parties. Throw a different type of party — like what's the baby's name? There are many more possibilities with that than whether or not it has a penis." *theguardian.com*, 29 Jun 2020; *rollingstone.com*, 20 Aug 2020; *patch.com*, 25 Feb; *today'sparent.com*, 5 May; *prospectmagazine.co.uk*, 20 May; *nypost.com*, 11 Jun 2019, 17 May 2021.



ABOVE: A firework at a gender reveal party triggered a wildfire in southern California that destroyed 7,000 acres (2,800 hectares) and forced many residents to flee their homes. INSET: Samuel Montesalvo's gender reveal stunt saw him go up in (blue) smoke.

SIDELINES...

PERFECT!

To report on the recent fuel shortage created by panic buying, the BBC sent a reporter to a petrol station in Stockport, picking the ideal man for the job, Phil McCann. *Mail on Sunday*, 26 Sept 2021.

A DOG'S GOTTA DO...

Tilly, a border collie/red heeler cross went missing after being thrown from her owner's car in a road accident. Despite 10 hours of searching, Tilly's owner Linda Oswald failed to find the dog. Two days later, Tyler, Travis and Zane Potter spotted a strange dog herding sheep on their nearby farm — it was Tilly doing what came naturally despite never having encountered sheep before. *boing-boing.net*, 10 Jun 2021

SNAKE SURPRISE

A 65-year-old man in Graz, Austria, "felt a nip in the genital area" after sitting on the toilet in his flat. Looking into the pan, he came face to face with a 5ft (1.6m) albino reticulated python which had escaped unnoticed from the flat of the man's 24-year-old neighbour and made its way through the drains to the toilet. A reptile expert captured and cleaned the snake before returning it to its owner who is now facing possible prosecution for causing bodily harm by negligence. *dailyrecord.co.uk*, 6 July 2021.

ACID CASUALTIES

Greek Orthodox priest Theofylaktos Kombos, 37, was arrested in Athens after he hurled a bottle of acid over seven bishops. The bishops were conducting a disciplinary hearing to decide if Kombos should be defrocked after he had been discovered with 1.8 grams of cocaine hidden under his cassock "in the area of his genitals". The bishops, a police officer, a lawyer and another clergyman were rushed to hospital with burns, but all were expected to survive. *D.Mail*, 25 June 2021.

NOT SO SAFE

Skylah Williams, 10, was taken to hospital after an accident on a zipwire in a playground in Stithians, Cornwall. Hurling down the wire, she had hit a metal health and safety sign, gashing her thigh. *D.Telegraph*, 4 Aug 2021.

SIDELINES...

FETCH! OOPS...

After his four-year-old boxer dog, Lula, suffered a bullet wound in her jaw, Jonathan George, 31, from Ohio, claimed he had trained the dog to fetch his gun and it had gone off in her mouth. Police did not believe George's story and arrested him, after which he admitted he had accidentally shot the dog when trying to unload his gun while drunk. Although she lost an eye in the shooting, Lula survived and is recovering at an animal shelter. *complex.com*, 2 Sept 2021.

COW MYSTERY

A reward of \$40,000 has been offered for information about the death of 58 pregnant cows in a field near Jamestown, North Dakota. A further 15 cows survived but aborted their calves. Having ruled out lightning, anthrax, blue-green algae, clostridial disease, lead poisoning, lack of water and naturally occurring nitrate toxicity, the sheriff's office is baffled, concluding that the deaths were non-natural, but from an as yet undetermined cause. *kvr.com*, 1 Sept 2021.

NESS DOESN'T IMPRESS

While 2021 seems to have been a good year for Loch Ness Monster sightings, one tourist visiting the Loch was not impressed. Leaving a one-star review on TripAdvisor, "Ron" said: "What a disappointment, we travelled 400 miles from Grimsby to see the Loch Ness Monster and it didn't show up... wife and kids waited for hours, and the weather was terrible." *D.Mirror*, 14 Aug 2021.

MEMORABLE

US pet rehoming website Petfinder has started giving animals unusual names as a way of attracting new owners. Animal names include "Internet Explorer", "Pizza the Hut", "The Void", "Chaos", "Pog Slammer" and "Business Frog" (a cat). *boingboing.net*, 2 Sept 2021.



THE SCRYING GAME

The Mexican origin of Dr Dee's magic mirror revealed



STUART CAMPBELL



WELLCOME COLLECTION

ABOVE LEFT: Stuart Campbell examines the polished obsidian mirror. ABOVE RIGHT: Elizabethan polymath Dr John Dee.

The British Museum has long held a number of items relating to the Elizabethan occultist and polymath Dr John Dee (see FT290:74-76, 338:12-13), including a small crystal ball, several wax discs engraved with occult symbols and a hand mirror, or speculum, made of highly polished obsidian, a form of volcanic glass. The mirror was kept in a sharkskin case and used by Dee for "peering into the future". Notes that came to the museum into which Dr Dee used to call his Spirits[†]; these probably date from when it was later owned by the politician and writer Horace Walpole (see FT320:38-39, 340:4). It is highly polished on both sides and is nearly perfectly circular, 7.2in (18.5cm) in diameter and 0.5in (13 mm) thick, with a perforated tab on one side that probably served as a handle. While another object known to have been owned by Dee, a purple crystal on a chain, was supposed to have been given to him by the archangel Uriel, along with instructions for making a philosopher's stone, he never revealed the origin of this scrying mirror.

It has long been known that obsidian mirrors much like Dee's were made by

the Aztecs as they are illustrated in the Codex Tepetlaoztoc, a 16th-century Aztec pictorial manuscript created by inhabitants of Tepetlaoztoc complaining about the excessive tribute demands made by Spanish conquistadors. These mirrors were linked to the god Tezcatlipoca ("smoking mirror" in the Nahuatl language), an Aztec creation deity and a god of sorcerers. "He's often shown with a severed left foot, and he's got an obsidian mirror in place of his left foot," said Stuart Campbell, a professor of Near Eastern archaeology at The University of Manchester. "Sometimes they appear on his chest; sometimes they appear on his head." While it was known that the Spanish had brought some of these mirrors back to Europe, it was not known whether Dee's mirror was of Aztec origin or was a European copy. They were highly prized because obsidian is extremely hard and it required laborious effort to grind it flat and polish it to mirror consistency, using abrasive sand and similar materials.

Now the question of the mirror's origin has been solved using X-ray fluorescence, which enables researchers to compare the ratios of elements in the mirror to samples from

obsidian sources used by the Aztecs in Mexico. "Because obsidian only occurs in very specific volcanic locations, it's almost always got a very distinct chemical profile," said Campbell, who carried out the study. His team's analysis showed that Dee's mirror was made of obsidian that was a close match to that found near Pachuca in Mexico, one of the main sources of the Aztecs' obsidian, so Dee must have acquired it after it had been brought back from Mexico. Interestingly, it was not just the mirror that came from Mexico, its function did too. Campbell says that the mirrors had "a set of very specific cultural meanings in the Aztec Empire," being used for looking into the future and communicating with spirits, and it seems this meaning was preserved when they were brought to Europe, making the mirrors attractive to European occultists like Dee. Once Dee started using the mirror, "it gained a whole new life and a whole new set of meanings — and it's continued to acquire those," Campbell said. "So, it now sits in the British Museum as an occult artefact. It's got its own biography and its own impact in the world. I think, because of that, it's a particularly fascinating object." *livescience.com*, 10 Oct 2021.



WORKING UP A SWEAT | Exploring Ireland's 17th century stone saunas



HOLMES GARDEN PHOTOS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: A sweathouse in County Cavan, Ireland. BELOW: Archaeologist Aidan Harte, leader of the Leitrim Sweathouse Project.

Scattered across the landscape of County Leitrim in Ireland are more than 100 sturdy, grass-covered igloo-like stone structures. For a county with only 35,000 inhabitants, the sheer number of these structures is impressive. There are others across Ireland, but nowhere near as many as are found in Leitrim. Long abandoned, they were once a vital part of the healthcare of the local population and the Leitrim Sweathouse Project is now trying to document these structures and understand their history. They date back to the early 17th century, and many continued to be used until the early 20th century. They functioned as a kind of intense stone sauna, usually to treat illness, most commonly rheumatism, arthritis, fevers and respiratory conditions. Turf or wood fires were lit inside the structure and the door and roof vent blocked. Several hours later, the smoke would be released, the embers swept out and the naked patient would crawl in and sweat in the intense heat radiating from the stones for as long as they could bear, before plunging into a

They are a local variant of a global tradition of sweat cures



LEITRIM SWEATHOUSE PROJECT

nearby stream to cool off.

Many users, though, viewed the cure as worse than the disease, and while sweating does have medicinal benefits for some conditions, the effect must have functioned mostly as a placebo. Some accounts also suggest the sweathouses were used to conceal illicit distilleries or were used for

hallucinogen-driven rituals for connecting with ancient gods. Archaeologist Aidan Harte, who leads the project, is inclined to doubt this, but as so little is known about the structures, he can't completely dismiss these ideas. Equally obscure is the origin of the sweathouses. Saunas and the like have a long history in Scandinavia, so perhaps the sweathouses could trace their history to the Vikings, who played a major part in Irish history between the 9th and 12th centuries; but as none seem to date from before the 16th century, this seems unlikely. Other suggestions are that Irish visitors to America could have got the idea from Native American sweat lodges, or even that travellers to the east had been inspired by Islamic hammams. Archaeologist Ronan Foley, though, thinks they are just a local variant of a global tradition of sweat cures, arguing that "the healing value of sweating was well known. Building small buildings that induced sweating from local materials would have been sort of worked out by Irish rural dwellers." bbc.com/travel, 11 Oct 2021.

SIDELINES...

STANDOFF INTERRUPTED

Florida police were in a tense standoff with an armed suspect, holed up on the roof of a house, when their attention was diverted by a speeding golf cart crashing through their perimeter, with the driver ignoring their demands to stop. When they finally caught the wayward cart, police found it was being driven by Jessica Smith, 28, who was completely naked and smelled strongly of alcohol. Police report that she "was assisted out and handcuffed" and charged with obstruction. thesmokinggun.com, 7 Sept 2021.

ALLIGATOR LESSON

Florida man William "Bubba" Hodge told police officers he was "teaching it a lesson" when they arrested him for stealing a live alligator from a miniature golf course and trying to throw it onto the roof of a cocktail lounge. Unimpressed, the police charged Hodge with possession and injury of an alligator, unarmed burglary of an occupied dwelling, theft and criminal mischief. D.Mirror, 24 Jul 2021.

TWO!

When golfer David Giles hit a hole-in-one at the Oaks Golf Club in York, his partners were amazed and excited, never having witnessed one before; then one of them, Chris Bunce, did it again with the next shot at the same hole. The odds against two consecutive holes-in-one are 17 million to one. Bunce said: "We were gobsmacked at what we'd done." D.Mirror, 19 Aug 2021.

EVEN MORE BOGUS

While Bogus Social Workers have a long history, according to the Environment Agency Anglia's Twitter account, there are now also Bogus Water Bailiffs. Apparently, people claiming to be water bailiffs have been trying to gain access to fisheries across Essex and the Agency is warning people to check their ID before admitting them. EnvAgencyAnglia, 8 Sept 2021.

DUNG CRIME

Police in central India started a massive manhunt after thieves stole more than 800kg (1,770lb) of cow dung from a storehouse in Dhurena village, valued at 1,600 rupees (£15). D.Telegraph, 24 Jun 2021.

SIDELINES...

KILLER COW

Researcher Alex Jiang, of the University of Queensland, researched the interaction between cows and koalas by using a soft toy on a remote-controlled car and concluded that cattle posed a serious threat to koalas by trampling them to death. He said: "There are witness statements from farmers confirming that cattle have been seen chasing koalas," and anecdotal evidence of koala deaths "due to cow trampling". The way cows responded to Jiang's decoy confirmed that this was probable. *Adelaide Advertiser*, 26 Sept 2020.

LUCKY BABY

In Shenzhen, China, emergency medic Li Huan saved a baby when it was accidentally born on the toilet and slipped down the waste pipe. He was visiting a neighbour when the woman's mother-in-law called for help and was able to fish the baby out and help it to breathe. After being taken to hospital both mother and baby were said to be fine. *Metro*, 27 Jul 2021.

DON'T DODONPA

The Fuji-Q Highland Park in Japan has suspended operation of its popular "Do-Dodonpa" rollercoaster until further notice after a mysterious spate of injuries. Famed for going at "super death" speed and being the world's fastest-accelerating roller-coaster, Do-Dodonpa had been operating safely for 20 years; then, during 2021, six riders sustained bone fractures in separate incidents while riding it, including four who broke their neck or back. Despite intensive investigation no cause has been found for the injuries, although the park speculates that riders may have not been using shoulder restraints properly. *vive.com*, 23 Aug 2021.



MARTIN ROSS

ANOTHER RAT KING | Entangled Estonian rodents found stuck in a henhouse



ABOVE: A rat king in the University of Tartu Natural History Museum. BELOW: The new rat king filmed by Johan Uibopuu.

It seems that rat kings are like buses: none for ages, then two turn up at once. Following hard on the heels of the unusual rat king discovered near Stavropol in southwest Russia (FT412:4), a second has turned up, this time in Põlva County, Estonia, close to where the only other 21st century rat king was found in 2005.

The Stavropol rat king was unusual in that it was found in open country, well away from the region where most others have been discovered, and probably involved brown rather than black rats. The new king sticks to a far more traditional template: Estonia is in northeast Europe, which is where most other examples have come from – almost all have been found in Germany or neighbouring countries – and it was found in a henhouse on a farm, not in the open. Apart from the Stavropol rat king, all the others have been found in buildings. From examining the pictures, it is almost certainly made up of the more usual black rats as well. What is unusual about



"I tried untying them, but it was quite complicated to understand"

this one though, is that, like the Stavropol king, it was found while most of its 13 constituent rats were still alive and that video of it was taken (see <https://bit.ly/3jPIEWu>).

The rat king was found by qualified vet Johan Uibopuu and his mother when they went to feed their hens. "My

mother went to feed the birds in the morning, opened the door, and the rats were in front of the door as if on a tray. They had burrowed a tunnel right in front of the door and gotten stuck in that tunnel. My mother could not do anything. I tried untying them, but it was quite complicated to understand if their tails were tied or if they were stuck to the underlay," he said. Looking at the video, it appears that the rats' tails are tightly enmeshed in a ball of debris from the henhouse floor that forms a solid lump at the centre of the entanglement. As it is very difficult for rats to move and feed when in a king, they are usually dead when found. In this king, the majority are alive but were apparently in poor condition. Andrei Miljutin, curator of the Tartu Natural History Museum where the rats were taken, said that it was unlikely that the remaining rodents would have lasted more than a day, so they were humanely euthanised and have now been added to the museum collection, which also houses the 2005 Estonian rat king. *news.err.ee*, 21 Oct 2021.

JOHAN UIBOPUU

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amazon

PAUL SIEVEKING unearths the latest finds, including a Bronze Age pendant and an Iron Age idol

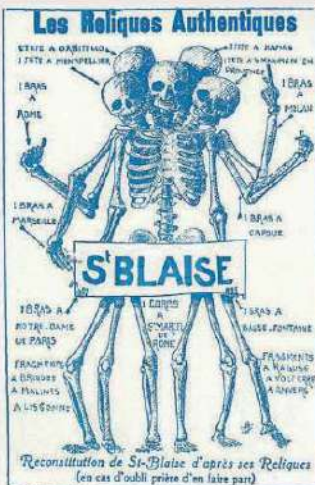
ROYAL 'STRAW'

After being deposed, Henry VI – the saintly but ineffectual mediaeval monarch – was most likely killed in the Tower of London in 1471 before being buried at Chertsey Abbey in Surrey. Henry was revered as a healing saint following his death, and had his own cult which may have been lucrative to the monks. Donning his hat was said to cure headaches. In 1484, by order of Richard III, Henry's body was appropriated by clergy from St George's Chapel at Windsor, along with the income generated by pilgrims' donations. It was there in 1910 that experts exhuming the royal remains (by order of King George V) found that one of the arm bones (a humerus) had been replaced by a pig's. Research suggests the missing bone may have been stolen, then passed off as the arm of Saint Blasius. Pilgrims would have drunk wine through the bone in the hope of a cure. Dr Euan Roger, a mediaeval specialist at the National Archives, found evidence of the theft in Henry VIII's 1535 audit of relics in the *Compendium Compertorum*, which records that the monks of Chertsey Abbey suddenly came into possession of a human arm bone, which they claimed to be that of St Blaise of Sebastea (aka St Blasius), an Armenian bishop and physician venerated as the patron saint of wool combers and throat ailments.

According to the *Acta Sanctorum*, he was martyred in AD 316 by being beaten, attacked with iron combs, and beheaded. As he was being led to jail, a mother set her only son, choking to death on a fishbone, at his feet, and the child was cured straight away. The monks were known to offer a sip of wine poured through "the arm bone of Saint Blaise" to pilgrims suffering from throat pain. Dr Roger could find no record of them being given an arm relic at any point in their history. There are multiple relics of St Blaise in a variety of churches and chapels, including multiple whole bodies, at least four heads and several jaws, at least eight arms, and so on. The sudden appearance of the relic may have been an attempt by the Chertsey monks to recoup the income they lost when Henry's bones were transferred. Where the bone is now, God alone knows. *D.Telegraph*, *winespectator.com*, 20 May 2021.

BESIDE THE SEASIDE

● Fishermen have found a cow horn thought to be more than 5,000 years old. Brothers Martin and Richard Morgan were inspecting a site in the Severn Estuary at Subbrook in Monmouthshire at low tide in



TOP: "The Authentic Relics", a cartoon in a French magazine mocking the supposed relics of Saint Blaise, scattered in various locations, of which several full-fledged skeletons could have been constructed. ABOVE CENTRE: The impressive aurochs horn found by fishermen. ABOVE: The idol unearthed in a Roscommon bog.

late May 2020 when they discovered the 27in (69cm) aurochs horn, weighing 6lb (2.7kg). Aurochs were a species of large wild cattle that inhabited Asia, Europe and North Africa and are the ancestor of domestic cattle. The last aurochs were recorded in Poland in 1627, but they are thought to have disappeared from the Severn around 3000 to 1200 BC. *D.Express*, *Metro*, 3 June 2020.

● Taking an evening stroll along a beach on the Isle of Wight, Anthony Plowright kicked what he thought was an old football before realising it was a human skull. He put it in a bag, took it home and emailed the police. The brown skull turned out to be 2,800 years old, from the early Iron Age, and was donated to the Isle of Wight Heritage Service for exhibition. *D.Mirror*, 16 Nov 2019.

GOTNACRANNAGH IDOL

A 1,600-year-old wooden idol has been retrieved from a bog in Gotnacranagh, Co Roscommon, around 6km (3.7 miles) from the prehistoric royal site of Rathcroghan. The Iron Age idol was made from a split trunk of an oak tree, with a small human-shaped head at one end and several horizontal notches carved along its body. It is being conserved at University College Dublin. Only a dozen such idols have been found in Ireland and at more than 2.5m (8ft), the Gotnacranagh Idol is the largest to date. It was carved just over 100 years before St Patrick came to Ireland.



ABOVE: The front and rear faces of the Bronze Age pendant named the "Shropshire Bulla" and described as "one of the most significant pieces of Bronze Age gold metalwork" ever discovered in Britain. **BELOW:** An 800-year-old chainmail vest or hauberk that spent two years lying unidentified in a garden shed in Co Longford.

"It is likely to be the image of a pagan deity," said Dr Eve Campbell, the excavation director. "Our ancestors saw wetlands as mystical places where they could connect with their gods and the Otherworld. The discovery of animal bone alongside a ritual dagger suggests that animal sacrifice was carried out at the site and the idol is likely to have been part of these ceremonies." Wooden idols are known from bogs across northern Europe where waterlogged conditions allow for the preservation of ancient wood. The lower ends of several figures were also worked to a point, suggesting that they may once have stood upright. *Irish Examiner*, 13 Aug 2021.

The 5.3m (17ft) larch wood idol found in a Siberian peat bog [FT409:14] is very much more ancient – 11,600 years old – and more than twice the length of the Gotnacrannagh Idol.

BRONZE AGE PENDANT

A hollow gold solar pendant from the late Bronze Age, discovered on farmland in Shropshire by metal detectorist Bob Greenaway on 12 May 2018, has been purchased for £250,000 by the British Museum, which described as "one of the most significant pieces of Bronze Age gold metalwork" ever discovered in Britain. It has been named the 'Shropshire bulla', bulla (plural bullae) being mediaeval Latin for a round seal, or classical Latin for a bubble or blob, derived from a type of rounded Etruscan pendant. The 3,000-year-old treasure, which will be exhibited at the British Museum next year, could easily pass for art deco jewellery from the 1930s. The surface is composed of 79-81% gold, 14-16% silver with the remaining being copper. It is 47.4mm (1.87 in) wide, 36.7mm (1.44in) high, and weighs 26.6g (0.94oz).



It is the second such pendant to be found in Britain – with another six unearthed in Ireland (the latest from County Down in 2008). The other English one was dredged from the River Irwell in 1772, during works to widen a section of the Manchester ship canal, and was widely assumed to be Roman because of its quality. It was sold at auction in 1806 for £2 4s 4d to a man called 'Carrudas' before disappearing from sight. As it was quite light, it has probably not been melted down for bullion, so might turn up again. A drawing of it appeared in Edward Baines's *History of Lancashire*. *Current Archaeology*, 11 Mar 2019; *Guardian*, 4 Mar 2020; *BBC News*, 10 Sept 2021.

NORMAN CHAIN MAIL FOUND IN IRELAND

An 800-year-old vest of chain mail, known as a hauberk, was dug up from a drain near Granard Motte in Co Longford in Ireland two years ago and lay in a shed unidentified until last August, when the farmer who found it attended a Norman People exhibition as part of National Heritage Week

and realised what he had. The hauberk dates to about 1172 when the Normans arrived in Longford, linking in with the story of Richard de Tuite and the construction of the timber-frame castle on the motte in 1199. To discover a Norman hauberk in such good condition and intact is extremely rare. *[RTE]* 20 Aug 2021.

OLDEST KNOWN TATTOO TOOLS

Ancient tattooing tools are rarely found or even recognised as implements for creating skin designs; but new microscopic studies of two turkey leg bones with sharpened ends indicate that Native Americans used them to make tattoos between about 5,520 and 3,620 years ago. These bones, stained with red and black pigment, were excavated from a burial pit in Ferndale in 1985, and are the world's oldest known tattooing tools, according to archaeologist Aaron Deter-Wolf of the Tennessee Division of Archaeology in Nashville and his colleagues.

The find suggests that tattoo traditions in eastern North America extend back more than a millennium earlier than previously thought. Damage on and near the bone tips resembles distinctive wear previously observed on experimental tattooing tools made from deer bones. Two turkey wing bones found in the Ferndale grave display microscopic wear and pigment residues that probably resulted from applying pigment during tattooing; and pigment-stained seashells in the grave may have held solutions into which tattooers dipped those tools. Ötzi the Iceman, found in an Alpine glacier in 1991 [FT60:14, 62:12] and dated to around 5,250 years ago, displays the oldest known tattoos, but none of the tools used to make his tattoos have been found. *sciencenews.org*, 25 May 2021.



Intoxicated elk and drunken jumbos

DAVID HAMBLING raises a festive glass and shares stories of inebriated animals – but are they true?

Are humans the only animals that like to go out and get drunk? Tales abound of animals seeking natural sources of alcohol, then indulging in drunken antics before passing out and sleeping it off. These stories are perennially popular fillers in news media, from where they sometimes make their way to *Fortean Times*. Variants involve elephants, moose, bears, pigs, monkeys and other animals, and they resound in the echo chambers of the Internet. Those repeating them rarely pause to consider how much truth there is to the tales.

French naturalist Adulpe Deleorgue gave one of the earliest modern reports in the 1830s when he noted that male elephants became aggressive after eating fallen marula fruit. His guides told him that this was because the decaying fruit was alcoholic. "The elephant has in common with man a predilection for a gentle warming of the brain induced by fruit which has been fermented by the action of the sun," wrote Deleorgue.

While alcohol is often an acquired taste in humans, some animals do take to drink and there are many recorded instances of pub dogs and other domestic animals becoming regular drinkers. Some wild monkeys have learned to steal alcohol when it is available, but such opportunism is not the same as seeking alcohol in the wild.

Rats and mice have been the preferred test subjects for research into the biology of alcoholism since the 1940s, but normally rats are light drinkers and researchers had to breed a special strain of alcohol-preferring albino lab rats in Indiana in 1963. These have since been used to test theories about reinstatement – how readily a subject goes back to alcohol after a period of abstinence. In such studies the motivation to drink has to come from the animal.

In 1984, researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, even showed that elephants would "readily self-administer" unflavoured seven per cent alcohol. This IgNobel-worthy research suggested that elephants might be natural drinkers.

The drunken elephant theory had a major setback in 2006 though, when a team of biologists from the University of Bristol calculated how much alcohol there was in fermenting fruit and the amount necessary for elephantine intoxication. "Assuming all other model factors are in favour of inebriation, the intoxication would minimally require that the elephant... consumes a diet of only marula fruit at a rate of at least 400



per cent normal maximum food intake," they concluded.

The researchers calculated that it would take 55 litres of fermented juice, assuming seven per cent alcohol. This would translate to about 1,500 fruit, far more than an elephant would actually consume.

There is some play in the numbers, but it is hard to make the case for drunken pachyderms. Naturalists at the Kruger National Park report that some elephants do behave strangely around marula trees, but they suggest there might be another cause, such as accidentally eating beetle pupa that occur in the bark of the marula tree. These are highly toxic – local San people use the pupa to poison their arrows – and may have a central nervous system effect. It has also been suggested that the marula tree is a valuable food resource, and the perceived aggressiveness may simply be defending it.

"These models were highly biased in favour of inebriation but even so failed to show that elephants can ordinarily become drunk. Such tales, it seems, may result from 'humanising' elephant behaviour," said the Bristol researchers.

There is a similarly persistent myth in Sweden that in autumn the orchards are full of elk who seek out fermented apples to get drunk on, and stories appear every autumn in Swedish newspapers. Pictures of an elk in a swimming pool or stuck in an apple tree are attributed to drunken behaviour.

But as Prof Petter Kjellander, of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, pointed out, there is no actual evidence for

these claims. "It's just a rumour, as far as I can tell, no trustworthy source has ever shown it to be true," Kjellander told *The Local* in 2014.

Again, the issue is one of bodyweight versus alcohol content. An adult elk tips the scales at something over 700kg (1,543lb), and fermented apple juice only contains a few per cent alcohol. No human society consumes alcohol in the form of decaying fruit: everyone has figured out that to get worthwhile booze they need to extract the juice and ferment it over a prolonged period, and often add sugar or other sweeteners to get the required alcohol. Moose probably eat apples for other reasons. "Apples are attractive to them, so it's no surprise they go for them. I think there's a natural explanation to all this that doesn't involve alcohol," says Kjellander.

Similar stories are told about moose drunk on natural cider in Alaska, including a series of tales about a famous individual in Anchorage nicknamed Buzzwinkle. Again, these seem to be more about the mishaps of hungry animals trying to negotiate their way in human spaces than anything alcohol-related, but saying the animals are drunk makes a more entertaining tale.

The same argument about bodyweight and alcohol content applies to pigs, bears and other animals supposedly going on rampages after gorging on fermented fruit.

In 2020, Mareike Janiak at the University of Calgary added to the debate with a study of a gene producing the enzyme alcohol dehydrogenase-7, which removes alcohol from the body. Janiak found that this gene occurred in primates (including humans), and fruit- and nectar-eating bats. Carnivores, bovines, elephants and most other groups lack the capacity to process alcohol. This could mean that elephants, unlike fruit bats, do not encounter significant amounts of alcohol, and so have not evolved to deal with it. It might also be that elephants, lacking this enzyme, can get drunk on less fruit than the Bristol researchers calculated.

Clearly, more research is needed to get to the truth. In the meantime, stories of drunken animals will continue to be a staple of the "and finally..." segment of news programmes. But you can't believe everything you see in the news.

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Phantoms of plague and pestilence

ALAN MURDIE asks how pandemics influence our notions of post-mortem survival

November and December are the months for the remembrance of the dead across the Western world. It is a particularly poignant association at the present time, with the UK having suffered the highest pandemic death toll in Europe, officially recording over 162,000 people as having died from Covid at the time of writing (mid-October 2021). Beyond these grim official figures there is a far greater number of family members and friends bereaved during the pandemic, with many denied a proper opportunity for fully mourning their loved ones, arising from restrictions imposed upon funeral gatherings and the closure of many churches and places of worship.

Over the course of the pandemic, I have received several media enquiries about just how all this may be affecting reports of ghosts and claims of post-mortem survival. So far, there has been only rather superficial coverage and attention given to this (see for example, 'Are you self-isolating with a ghost?' *Daily Mail*, 24 May 2020). More seriously and meaningfully, it is clear the full implications the pandemic may have for beliefs concerning life after death are yet to emerge, amid many unresolved questions about how victims are to be best memorialised in the future.

Reflecting on this, I found myself thinking back to my investigations in summer 2020 into the haunting of Whispering Corner at Lytchett Matravers, Dorset [see **FT399:16-19**]. This site lies along a stretch of woodland footpath running down a hillside to the ancient church of St Mary. The path once served as an antique funeral route, reputedly dating back to the greatest plague in recorded history, the mediaeval Black Death.

This came back into my mind for two reasons. The first was discovering an account of how members of a 1970s paranormal research group, the Wessex Association for the Study of Unexplained Phenomena (WATSUP) experienced whispering voices at this isolated spot in August 1977 [see Nick Malore's letter, 'Bosky mumbling', **FT412:71**]. Three people maintained they heard the same peculiar auditory phenomena, previously recorded by Dorset author Rodney Legg (1947-2011) in his book *Ghosts of Dorset, Devon and Somerset* (1974), which had originally triggered my interest. Secondly, contemplating the experiences reported at Whispering Corner brings one squarely to the marks that the plague of 1347-49



The path once served as an antique funeral route, reputedly dating back to the Black Death

and contemporary notions of the afterlife etched upon both the landscape and social consciousness, with traces and effects still apparent today.

Details of the 1977 experiences appeared in a report entitled "Incident at Lytchett Matravers, Dorset" published in the *WATSUP Journal* (No. 8, 1978). The aim of the group was to "promote, initiate and support scientific investigation into all aspects of the unexplained". This led to them conducting a vigil at Whispering Corner on the night of 27-28 August 1977. After a preliminary reconnoitre of the woodland area, the six-strong team settled down to their vigil between 9.15pm and 9.30pm, weather conditions being dry and clear and with the Moon in its waxing, gibbous phase and almost full.

At approximately 11am, three members of the team – Lesley Lawrence, Martin Symes and John Postans – heard "a mumbling sound" at the spot. This was described as "like two people talking to each other, but the conversation was not

ABOVE: The Church of St Mary, Lytchett Matravers, Dorset.

distinguishable". A dog belonging to one member showed what were considered significant reactions – "his tail went down and his ears went up and the hair on his back began to rise" – appearing to hear something in the woods. A tape-recorder had been switched on at 10.45pm, but nothing was picked up.

As an aside, the reactions of the dog observed at Whispering Corner bring to mind the behaviour of a Great Dane owned by Peter Bander during early experiments into Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) in England in 1971. The dog was apparently able to hear the voices on tape long before any human experimenters. Bander reported how his dog "would suddenly bark at some 'intruder', his bristles would stand up and he would make the same noises I would normally associate with a stranger approaching the house." (*Carry On Talking*, 1972, by Peter Bander). Dogs are traditionally credited with psychic sensitivity and enjoy a greater hearing range than humans, stretching into higher frequency sounds; though equally a perfectly normal cause might be behind the sounds at Lytchett Matravers. Other participants in the vigil that August night heard nothing unusual.

The group remained in and around Whispering Corner until around 2.30am, noting there "was no atmosphere of fear at the site, before, during or after the incident". Their report concludes by saying the local explanation for the sounds is that they are ghostly voices from long ago, "said to be those of the pallbearers who once carried bodies to the cemetery during the Plague. As the story has it, they would stop and rest at this point." Altogether, WATSUP considered the vigil successful and contemplated returning.

In acknowledging local beliefs, WATSUP showed awareness of the social geography of the area, whereby the length of the old coffin path and the isolation of the church are attributed to the disastrous impact of the Black Death upon the population of Lytchett Matravers. Those living in the immediate vicinity of the church either died in their homes or fled. Fear of the plague meant their pestilential homes were permanently abandoned and fell into ruin (even in modern times, *FT* has logged numerous cases of dead bodies left shut inside of properties for long periods). Vegetation and woodland encroached over them, leaving the church isolated from the new village that eventually grew up many years later.

Continuing from Whispering Corner down to the church itself, the building once contained three chantries, specially endowed portions exclusively reserved for praying for the dead. Here prayers and psalms were sung and chanted and Masses conducted by a sponsored priest for the souls of Sir John Maltravers (1290-1364) and other members of his wealthy and powerful family which held the nearby manor for centuries.

Two chantries at Lytchett Matravers were endowed by Agnes De Bereford, the second wife of Sir John. One lay on the east side of the Maltravers family north aisle with an altar to St Michael, and the other dedicated to St Mary was set on the western side. A third chantry, known as Gibbon's Chantry, projected from the south wall of the nave, with remains just visible outside in the churchyard.

The mediæval chantry movement was inspired by the sincere belief that the souls of sinners not irrevocably damned to Hell might be confined in the zone of Purgatory, a kind of spiritual half-way house between Heaven and Hell. Here souls might undergo cleansing and a term of imprisonment capable of reduction by repentance and specially dedicated prayers. Both forebears and descendants could be thus aided. Conscious of their own mortality, the living sought to ease their personal access into Heaven by making arrangements for chantries to remember them.

The scriptural basis for this was limited,



ABOVE: The Black Prince's Chantry, now the Huguenot Chapel, in Canterbury Cathedral. The Prince endowed the chapel in 1363 and arranged for it to be manned in perpetuity by two priests.

but reinforced by the view that ghosts were spirits trapped in Purgatory that could enjoy a temporary release on a kind of 'ticket of leave' to enable them to appear to the living. These guilt-wracked phantasms were extremely communicative, pleading for prayers and delivering sermons and warnings to observers about afterlife punishments, often weighted down by chains and heavy burdens or immersed in flames.

Sir John Maltravers had much guilt to purge. Reputedly he was part of the group responsible for cruelly murdering King Edward II, imprisoned inside Berkeley Castle, on 21 September 1327, inflicting the ghastliest death suffered by any British monarch. The sounds of the death agonies of the hapless king are said still to reverberate within the castle and in the surrounding countryside on the anniversary. The haunting was still spoken of in hushed tones by guides at the castle when I visited on 21 September 1996 (though changes in the calendar would shift the exact anniversary by 11 days). Sir John later received a pardon for this and other crimes from King Edward III, enabling retention of his Dorset estates. Nonetheless, his spouse obviously felt investment in chantries was a necessary precaution, an afterlife insurance policy for her husband and kinsfolk.

The creation of chantries accelerated in the aftermath of the Black Death, and over 2,500 examples, great and small, are recorded across the UK. The chantry movement in England stimulated a post-pandemic building boom, with grants and bequests funding increasingly grand churches, abbeys, chapels and colleges. A number of these are still providing benefits today. In all probability, many more existed

of which nothing is known; the existence of others remains in place names around England e.g. 'the Chantry Estate', Ipswich; the 'Chantry Shopping Centre,' Norwich; Chantry Street, Andover, and Chantry Lane, Canterbury. A Papal Bull of 1343 sanctioned the notion of indulgences, whereby donations to churches and ecclesiastical projects ensured periods of remission in Purgatory and facilitated early entry into Heaven. Such sponsorship and selling of prayers proved very lucrative, enriching ecclesiastical institutions and partly funding St Peter's in Rome. Instead of endowing institutions, others dedicated annual gifts of alms and doles for the poor as approved charitable works. Customs also existed of baking and distributing 'soul cakes', with each cake said to represent a soul in Purgatory. In exchange for a cake, the recipient would promise to pray for the dead of that household.

Trends in religious art and iconography also show the influence of the pandemic upon popular piety. The concept of a personified figure of Death made increasing appearances in painted and sculpted imagery, together with more abstract symbolism in the 'Danse Macabre' (or 'Dance of Death') in which animated skeletons partnered the living.

It seems possible the Black Death, sporadic warfare and famine led to people fearing the dead in a very different way. Prior to around 1400, evil ghosts in England often manifested as solid beings, walking corpses leaving their tombs and attacking the living rather like vampires from the Orthodox lands and the Balkans. These solid entities disappear from English communities after this period. Ironically, the large death toll and the resulting piles of bodies may have made the dead less frightening physically



GHOSTWATCH

but more threatening spiritually, amid a far more deadly and intangible menace striking victims at random. Lacking any knowledge or theory of germs or viral explanations, the air itself was considered pestilent, with the traumatised population coming to believe in more rarefied and mobile spiritual presences. Ideas of a ghostly death-cart, carrying plague victims and later transmogrified into phantom coaches, may date from this period.

In the following century, a fashion grew up among the wealthy for their personal tomb effigies to be carved so as to resemble corpses, creating so-called cadaver tombs emphasising the decay of the body and the hideousness of death. Some 40 examples are known in England, depicting the deceased with open chest cavities or swathed partly in shrouds. These represented the deceased "in a liminal state between life and death, with his or her muscles carved in tension as if alive, yet lain as if already dead... these *memento mori* sculptures largely reject any notion of resting in peace." ("Exploring Late-Medieval English Memento Mori Carved Cadaver Sculptures" by Christina Welch in *Dealing With the Dead: Mortality and Community in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 2018).

Then came the Reformation, suppressing Catholic practice and worship in all its forms. The Chantries Act 1547 specifically targeted chantries for extinguishment. Nor could any court enforce charitable bequests or trusts dedicated or devoted to saying prayers for the dead. Coupled with the Acts of Uniformity, 1548 and 1559, Masses for the dead became illegal and ultimately the saying or singing of any Masses became a penal offence from 1581 to 1791.

Nonetheless, around the country and particularly in Devon and Cornwall, the pre-Reformation ideas of ghosts and the veneration of the dead survived, according to folklorist Theo Brown (see *The Fate of the Dead: A Study in Folk Eschatology in the West Country After the Reformation*, 1979), as well as featuring in fiction. Long divorced from his Purgatorial origins, Jacob Marley's ghost returned centuries later in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, dragging chains and bemoaning his lot.

The stark differences between the purgatorial apparitions described in the Middle Ages and sightings of the largely silent shades of later eras prompted historian RC Finucane to argue in his classic *Appearances of the Dead* (1982) that ghosts must be a purely cultural product with no independent objective existence. This echoes psychical researcher SG Soal, who stated in 1922: "Nothing is more remarkable than the way in which subconscious mental phenomena accommodate themselves not only to the beliefs of the immediate entourage of the



A fashion grew up for so-called cadaver tombs emphasising the decay of the body

individual subject but also to the general beliefs of the age in which they appear" (in *SPR Journal*, 1929 vol.25, 177).

It is a viewpoint relieving many scholars from thinking more deeply on whether a core of real experiences may actually exist within mediaeval stories. All concur that surviving accounts of apparitions were coloured and framed by contemporary beliefs, viewed through a prism of theology and used as exempla to sustain and shore up religious dogmas.

However, caution is necessary. We do not find much mention of birds in surviving mediaeval texts (save for domestic fowls, falconry or if mentioned in the Bible), but we do not conclude other species did not exist. More pertinently, examining accounts one may find striking similarities and cross-cultural parallels between manifestations that span different eras, especially with poltergeists (a point Finucane also noted). I drew attention to such striking consistencies in a paper at the 39th annual SPR conference at Greenwich in July 2015 ("'Extraordinary Evidence' versus 'Similar Fact Evidence' Proving the Occurrence of Psi Outside the Laboratory", by Alan Murdie), a point that has since been picked up elsewhere (e.g. John Fraser in *Poltergeist: A New Investigation in Destructive Haunting*, 2020). Furthermore, contained within apparitional encounters are symbolic features whereby a hallucination or vision may convey information unknown at the time to witnesses. Additional elements may attach to the figure, such as wounds or

ABOVE: Cadaver tomb of William Sponne, St Lawrence's, Towcester, Northamptonshire.

injuries, or phantoms dripping water where someone has drowned.

The classic example is the sighting in September 1868 by Archdeacon Farler of the soaked and dripping figure of a friend who, as it turned out, had been drowned in the River Crouch in Essex the previous day. The symbolic elements were perhaps generated by the subconscious mind of Farler to convey the desperate situation and last sensations of his friend. The figure materialised again a fortnight later, and this time Farler observed his friend dressed in ordinary apparel and displaying no trace of accident. (In *Phantasms of the Living*, 1886, vol.1 by Gurney, Myers and Podmore).

It is possible to conceive of a dying mediaeval man or woman wracked with terror at the prospect of the afterlife and who, in their last moments, generates a mental image of Purgatory or Hell, ultimately picked up psychically by a living sensitive and perceived as a ghost. Accordingly, such an apparitional image would contain both a paranormal veridical element and a symbolic subjective one, drawing upon material from the subconscious minds of one or both parties. Thus, some mediaeval ghosts may represent hallucinations and visions combining cultural and paranormal aspects.

If this seems like having your soul-cake and eating it, so be it. Rather than side-stepping such questions as the fate of the dead and survival after death, historians should come off the fence and discuss such possibilities in light of the findings of psychical research. Meanwhile, both the Church and science ought to look more closely at the topic of survival, especially at the present time.



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

266: SIC(K) TRANSIT

"I will spue thee out of my mouth" –
Revelations 13.16

Not the most attractive topic, so I'll try not to go on *ad nauseam*.

Prompted by newspaper/website reports over the last few years of British women suffering from perpetual vomiting: Rebecca Griffiths, Stephanie Horner, Jayde Pitt, Christina Smith – see (e.g.) *BBC News*, 25 Jan 2018.

Doctors have a name for it – Cyclic Vomiting Syndrome – but not a cure, only desperate palliatives.

Various tomb paintings show ancient Egyptians copiously vomiting; cf. Dean Martindale's (aka Jimmy Dunn) website illustrated essay. Some consider this ritualistic, others satirical, still others as mere realism, the result of "one too many", Egyptians being ridiculed for beer-addiction by Æschylus (*Suppliant Women*, vv952-3).

Likewise, various similar depictions on ancient Greek pottery: same scenes, same diverse explanations; cf. Michael Vickers, *Greek Symposia* (1978, 20-1). *Symposium* in Greek connotes a drinking-party, a meaning lost in modern usage. You'd think these would produce a lot of spewing-up. However, in the most famous one, Plato's (cf. Jonathan Miller's TV re-creation), most guests go quietly home (straight to work, in Socrates's case) the most bibulous (including Aristophanes) simply falling asleep. Lucian's satirical *Banquet* ends with fisticuffs, room-trashing, sexual high-jinks, passings-out – but no vomiting. A fragment from Eubulus's comic play *Semele*, or *Dionysus* has the god lay out the various consequences of over-indulgence, much the same as in Lucian.

Another comic fragment, quoted by Athenaeus (*Learned Men at Dinner*, bk14 ch616 paraE), rebukes "You are causing trouble by bringing this vomiting woman to dinner," the nauseous lady being Queen Arsinoë (Ptolemaic wife of Macedonian King Lysimachus).

There are at least a dozen words for various vomiting styles in ancient Greek. One, *kopriemetos*, indicates throwing up excrement. Hippocrates (*Epidemics*, bk2 ch19) reports a patient called Pittacus who experienced this. So does Scribonius Largus (one of emperor Claudius's doctors), *Remedies*, no.118; cf. my piece on him in *Rheinisches Museum* 135 (2004), 74-82. Medical term for this condition is ileus, a condition caused by blocked or twisted bowel – classicist Walter Headlam died

from it) Largus's patient was the slave of a perfume-seller. His prescription – fenugreek blown up the anus – sounds very Gwyneth Paltrow.

Aldous Huxley (*Antic Hay*, 1923), referring to "the elegant marble vomitorium of Petronius Arbiter," is usually discredited as the first writer to perpetuate the still widespread mumpsimus that *Vomitorium* denotes a special room for spewing up in, before returning to re-gorge. In fact, he had been simultaneously (1871) anticipated by English author Augustus Hare and French writer Felix Pyat.

The word, of course, designates the passageways through which Roman arena/theatre-goers gained access to their seats.

This is made clear by Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 6. 4. 4: *vomitioria unde homines glomeratim ingredienti in sedilia se fundunt*. Macrobius seems the first and only author to use this word, though this rarity may well be accidental. Hard to believe such a piece of slang was not in previous common use.

Huxley read English, not Classics, at Oxford. Perhaps surprising, then, that he was unaware of the correct use of the term by H Rider Haggard in *Pearl Maiden* (1903): "Beyond lay the broad passage of the vomitorium. They gained it, and in an instant were mixed with the thousands who sought to escape the panic."

Surprisingly or not, this is not something that happens at Trimalchio's dinner party, given a host who invites anyone with his kind of bowel problems to relieve themselves right there in the room. The only emesis happens off-stage, when Habinnas reports that wife Scintilla had "almost puked up her insides" after tasting some bear-meat at a previous feast – he himself ate a pound without adverse effect.

Morbid Petronian footnote: one of his best modern commentators, Kenneth Rose, choked on his own vomit at 29. The same fate has also befallen many a rock star, notably Jon Bonham and Jimi Hendrix; cf. the catalogue of this and other bizarre demises in Jeff Pike's *The Death of Rock 'N Roll* (1993). Plus, of course, the drummer in *This Is Spinal Tap* who choked on someone else's vomit.

One of Rome's most notable spewers was Mark Antony, as befits a man who wrote a book *On His Own Drunkenness*. Cicero (*Second Philippic*, ch63) describes how he once, while transacting public business, vomited up wine and orts all over himself

and the speaker's platform.

Obvious modern (1992) parallel here is President George HW Bush vomiting into the lap of Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa.

Celsus (1st century AD, *On Medicine*, bk1 ch13) advises against self-induced vomiting to mitigate a debauched lifestyle, a warning echoed by imperial tutor Fronto (*On Eloquence*, ch4). Seneca (*Moral Letters*, no.47; *On Consolation: Letter to Helvia*, ch10 para2) is witness to neglect of this advice: "When we sit down at table, one person wipes away the spew, another bends down under the dining-room couch and collects what the drunks have left." And "They eat that they may vomit; they vomit that they may eat."

Suetonius (ch53) says Julius Caesar was indifferent to food, abstemious in drink. Cicero (*Letters to Atticus*, bk13 ch52 para2) says he was on a diet of emetics, to allow him to eat and drink without worry – Nero (Suetonius, ch20) would induce vomiting as part of his pre-concert preparations. Caesar's decorum once saved his life. Cicero (*Speech in Defence of King Deiotarus*, ch21) describes how assassins waited for him in the loo, but he foiled them by preferring to vomit privately in his bedroom.

A relatively modern parallel is provided by an 1882 American Congressional Report (online) describing the trial of Captain CH Campbell (Sixth Cavalry) for various offences, including drunken vomiting in his own tent. After five days of hearings, an inconclusive verdict was returned.

Claudius (Suetonius, ch33) used to induce vomiting by tickling his throat with a feather. This almost saved him when fetching up the mushrooms poisoned (probably by his wife Agrippina, Nero's mum), had not his doctor Xenophon tickled his palate with a toxic one.

Given his daily four colossal meals, plus stealing sacrificial meats from altars and (depending which source you read) consuming 100 or 1,000 oysters at one go, no surprise that Vitellius was the fattest of all emperors. Suetonius (ch13) says he accomplished this gargantuan intake by daily emetics.

I'm starting to feel sick. Those who want more should view the spectacular spewings in such films as: *Bridesmaids*; *I Love You, Man*; *Spaceballs*; *Stand By Me*; *The Exorcist*; *The Sixth Sense* (and not forgetting Monty Python's Mr Creosote)

"By Pollux, I wish too much that you'd puke up your lungs" – Plautus, *The Rope*, Act 2 sc. 6 v26.





KARL SHUKER welcomes back Blenheim's bees, plus a major owl find and a colourful catfish



ABOVE LEFT: The first ever photograph of a Shelley's eagle owl, taken in Ghana's Atewa Forest. ABOVE RIGHT: Martin Glatz with his colourful catfish catch.

BUZZED OFF? BUZZED BACK!

Scientists had long believed that England's indigenous strain of wild honeybee had been wiped out many years ago, as a result of competition with imported non-native strains and species of bee and, as the final agent of annihilation, the varroa mite *Varroa destructor*, a decimating species of tiny parasitic arachnid that attacks and feeds upon honeybees, and which arrived in mainland Britain in 1992. In comparison with the domesticated honeybees maintained in hives by beekeepers, the wild native English honeybee was smaller, darker, furrier, with smaller but more noticeably veined wings, and lived in nests sited within very small, inconspicuous tree cavities – and now, veteran bee conservationist Filipe Salbany has discovered no fewer than 50 colonies of wild honeybees, numbering approximately 800,000 specimens and fitting that description, living in complete anonymity in tree nests around 40-65ft (12-20m) above ground within the ancient oak woodlands of Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire.

Not only are these colonies self-sustaining, but they also appear resistant to the depredations of the varroa mite, despite having received no protective treatment – because no one had previously known of their existence here. Yet they have clearly inhabited the oak trees of Blenheim Palace for a very long time; one of their nests has been estimated to be at least 200 years old. Moreover, these wild tree-nesting honeybees swarm with multiple queens, up to nine at a time, rather than just one, which increases their colony's survival prospects, and they also forage for honeydew at lower environmental temperatures (down as far as 4°C) than foraging domesticated honeybees do. Not having been disturbed or threatened by humans, they are a lot more passive

and less likely to sting than domesticated honeybees, and their honey has a very unusual, floral taste, quite unlike that of the latter bees. Salbany suspects that there could be a number of still-undiscovered colonies of native wild honeybee elsewhere in England, the cryptic, tree-located nature of their nests having ensured that they have long remained overlooked. All of which provides another significant reason for preserving native English woodlands and the environment in general. www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/07/no-one-knew-they-existed-wild-heirs-of-lost-british-honeybee-found-at-blenheim

BIG OWL, BIG FIND

In 1872, Shelley's eagle owl, a new species of extremely large African owl, was officially described and named *Bubo shelleyi* by Richard Bowdler Sharpe, curator of the bird collection at London's Natural History Museum, based upon a single specimen that had been procured by a local hunter in Ghana. However, no further sightings have been reported in Ghana since the end of that long-gone decade, and only a few briefest of glimpses have been reported (but never confirmed) elsewhere in Africa. Moreover, the only confirmed living specimen ever photographed was a captive individual in Belgium's Antwerp Zoo in 1975.

In short, the very survival of this impressive species was deemed exceedingly tenuous for a very long time – but on 16 October 2021, while visiting Ghana's Atewa Forest, conservationist Dr Joseph Tobias from Imperial College London and Somerset-based freelance ecologist Dr Robert Williams inadvertently disturbed from its daytime roost an owl so huge that they initially mistook it for an eagle. During the 10-15 seconds that it remained perched before flying away they were able to snap some excellent

photographs that identified it conclusively as a specimen of Shelley's long-lost eagle owl. There is no other owl in Africa's rainforests as large as this one, with a total length of up to 2ft (60cm), and its rediscovery demonstrates how even sizeable species can long remain hidden from scientific detection. www.imperial.ac.uk/news/231335/owl-unseen-150-years-photographed-wild/

BANANA BOAT CATFISH

Although measuring up to a very dramatic 9ft (2.7m) long and possibly more, in coloration the wels or European giant catfish *Silurus glanis* is typically a nondescript dull grey dorsally and laterally, paler ventrally. However, the very sizeable specimen caught recently by Martin Glatz and hauled into his boat while fishing with his twin brother Oliver on a Dutch lake was anything but nondescript or dull in appearance. On the contrary: as aptly described in a *LiveScience* report, it resembled "an enormous writhing banana with gills". Instead of being grey, this chromatic curiosity was a bright lemon-yellow shade dorsally and laterally, contrasting very visibly with its pure white underparts.

Media reports state that this eye-catching individual may have been leucistic, but the sheer banana-hued brightness of its very atypical coloration indicates that it may alternatively be xanthistic – xanthism being a genetically induced mutation in which specimens exhibiting it are a vivid yellow colour. Happily, Glatz chose not to retain this remarkable rarity as a preserved exhibit or suchlike, but instead released it back into the water, where, if its striking coloration does not make it vulnerable to predation, this lemon-zested catfish may live for a very long time and grow even larger, no doubt startling future anglers visiting its lake. www.livescience.com/giant-yellow-catfish-leucism



HELLSTROM CHRONICLES REDUX

Strange tales from the alien world of insects



ABOVE LEFT: Kleptopharmacophagy in milkweed butterflies. Here a male is seen scratching and feeding on a caterpillar. ABOVE RIGHT: Dr Babu's colourful ghost ants.

CANNIBAL BUTTERFLIES

Researchers in North Sulawesi, Indonesia, have discovered a surprising and grisly behaviour in milkweed butterflies. They have repeatedly observed adult male butterflies using tiny claws on their feet to scratch wounds in the bodies of caterpillars of their own species to slurp up the liquid that oozes out. Milkweed butterflies are so named because they feed on milkweed plants and use chemicals from the sap to repel predators and to produce pheromones to attract females. The butterflies do most of their feeding as caterpillars, so these are full of concentrated milkweed chemicals, but adult males also supplement the chemicals they ate as caterpillars through "leaf scratching" where they use their small claws to scratch milkweed plant so they can sip extra sap through their long proboscis. Some butterflies, though, have found a shortcut: by scratching caterpillars instead of leaves they get ready-concentrated sap. "The caterpillar larvae would contort their bodies rapidly in what appeared to be futile attempts to deter the persistent scratching of adults," while the adults would actively drink from the wounded and oozing caterpillars for hours, so intent on drinking that not even the touch of a human observer could distract them. The butterflies were also observed drinking from dead

caterpillars, but it was not clear whether these were already dead or had been sucked to death by the adults. The scientists clearly had fun coming up with names for this behaviour, coining the term "kleptopharmacophagy", meaning "consuming stolen chemicals", but also offering the alternatives "kairopharmacophagy" (feeding on defensive chemicals from wounded caterpillars) or "necropharmacophagy" (feeding on defensive chemicals from dead caterpillars). In all, they found seven species of butterfly indulging in this behaviour. *livescience.com*, 11 Sept 2021.

PARASITES APLENTY

When scientists reintroduced the rare Glanville fritillary butterfly to the island of Sottunga in the Åland archipelago in Finland, they thought they were just introducing one species; in fact, they were introducing four. Along with the butterfly came the parasitic wasp *Hyposoter horticola*, which lives in the fritillary caterpillar and bursts out of it just before it pupates to transform into a butterfly. Some of these *H. horticola*, in turn, brought with them their own, even smaller, parasitic wasp *Mesochorus cf. stigmaticus*. These are "hyperparasites" that live in the *H. horticola* wasp and kill it just before it emerges from the caterpillar. *M. stigmaticus* wasps then emerge

from the caterpillar about 10 days later instead. And if that wasn't complicated enough, the female *H. horticola* wasps also carried with them a bacterium called *Wolbachia pipienti* that, through an as yet unknown mechanism, greatly increases their offspring's susceptibility to parasitism by the *M. stigmaticus* wasp, which can only live in *H. horticola*. Despite island species' vulnerability to extinction, this mini-ecosystem is still going strong, 30 years after the butterfly's reintroduction. *Guardian*, 14 Sept 2021.

METAL MOUTHS

Insect bites often seem disproportionately painful to the size of the creature inflicting them. It turns out that tiny creatures like ants can bite through human skin because their mouthparts and other offensive appendages are infused with metals such as zinc and manganese. Research by physicist Robert Schofield, of the University of Oregon in Eugene, has now revealed that the metal atoms are evenly dispersed through parts like ant teeth, spider fangs, scorpion stingers and marine worm jaws, and that this allows them to grow much thinner and sharper body parts. These parts, known as heavy element biomaterials, are stiffer and more damage-resistant than the rest of their carapace and have "the kinds of properties

that you want in a knife or needle". Research on the zinc-infused teeth of leaf-cutting ants showed that they also allow them to cut using only about 60 per cent of the energy and muscle mass it would otherwise take. *sciencenews.com*, 8 Sept 2021.

PAINTING WITH ANTS

After Dr Mohammed Babu, of Mysore, India, spilled some milk on his kitchen floor, he noticed that the ants that scurried to the spill turned white after drinking it. They belonged to the species *Tapinoma melanocephalum*, or ghost ant, which has a dark head, pale legs and a translucent abdomen. This gave Dr Babu an idea – he mixed food colouring with sugar, water and a waxy substance, set different coloured droplets out on a plastic sheet in his garden for the ants to feed on and photographed the results. "As the ant's abdomen is semi-transparent, the ants gain the colours as they sip the liquid," he said. Some went on to sample several of the droplets, giving themselves multicoloured striped abdomens. The experiment also revealed something about their colour preferences: "Curiously, the ants preferred light colours – yellow and green," said Dr Babu. "The blue drops had no takers, until there was no space around the preferred yellow and green drops." *thesciencexplorer.com*, 22 Feb 2016; *smithsonianmag.com*, 16 Aug 2016.

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

In a global landscape marked by competing narratives, is it any wonder that conspiracism now plays a major role in shaping and controlling them asks **NOEL ROONEY**.

GET WITH THE NARRATIVE

COP 26, the periodic gathering of the great, green and good (and this year setting a new record for the amount of pollution produced by the delegates) came as the Covid era (it is hard to know how else to describe it, it's gone on so long) approached its second anniversary. On the face of it, two very different existential emergencies; but there are some curious similarities between the two, even if we dismiss the observation (common in the C-sphere) that both belong to the overall strategy of the New World Order.

I've been banging on for some years now about the migration of conspiracy theory into the mainstream, particularly in the news media, and I've observed a kind of step change in the status (or perhaps function is a better term) of conspiracism in a media atmosphere that is continually, tediously fervid and apocalyptic. It is not unusual for a long-running – and hotly disputed – topic in current affairs to exhibit elements of conspiratorial thinking on both sides of the debate. And it is tantamount to conventional for each side to accuse the other of either engaging in a conspiracy or concocting conspiracy theories so as to muddy the (often murky to begin with) waters.

The long-running saga that was Russiagate is a perfect example. Before its rather undignified demise at the hands of actual evidence (and who is to say it won't resurrect itself at some point, if only to save the *Washington Post* from handing back its Pulitzer?) an outside observer might have been forgiven for thinking that every individual involved in the furor believed that every other individual involved was a conspirator or



It is no surprise that 'nudgers' now inhabit all the corridors of power

a conspiracy theorist; and, comically enough, that they were all bang on the money.

Climate and Covid provoke similar attitudes. In each case there is an official narrative; in each case there is a minority (albeit a fairly informed minority) that disputes elements of that narrative; and in each case there are groups and individuals (on both sides) whose views can reasonably be termed conspiracist. In some respects, they are both what one might call emergent mirror conspiracy theories; global phenomena that have morphed, somehow, into dual, mutually exclusive narratives and belief systems, which encourage conspiracism and accusations of it.

The idea of a narrative is key here. One of the reasons for conspiracy theory's migration into the mainstream is because the mainstream is dominated by competing narratives. This in itself is not new; but there has been

a subtle shift in the value of the narrative in recent years. It has become the primary expression of power and compliance and, equally, of dissent. It is no surprise that 'nudgers' (behavioural scientists) now inhabit all the corridors of power, and have become powerful in the process; shaping a narrative to encourage consensus or compliance is their stock in trade.

And in a world where the narrative is king, conspiracy theory is a shoo-in for court jester; its motley is the perfect camouflage in the gaudy spotlight of public affairs. It serves a raft of functions: useful idiots can be propped up like coconut shies to spout the extreme version of the official narrative, then be dismissed as conspiracists (after they have conveniently widened the Overton Window); even more useful idiots can be found among the dissenters, offering exaggerated versions of the dissenting view that can be shot down by gleeful conformists; and those who dissent – often with good reason – from the official narrative can be neatly pigeon-holed with other, rather less cogent individuals who have expressed a similar viewpoint.

Where the power relations between the opposing views is more even (which is not often the case) the adversarial drama is usually symmetrical, and regularly comic. But in those situations (and both climate change and Covid belong here) where the official narrative has the backing of governments, powerful institutions and corporations, the dissenting view is more likely to be conspiratorial, at least on its extreme fringes, and the consensus view is more likely to include an image of the dissenting voice as emanating from under a tin-foil hat.

Both climate change and

Covid have their share of alarmist voices; these voices often tilt the narrative away from science and rationality towards something more magical and religious in tone. The consensus of the powerful indulges these voices because they give the cold, technocratic incantations of scientism an emotive, human tone, even if the content is wayward. And, of course, they turn the public perception of the problem into a more urgent existential threat. Meanwhile, the voices of dissent, though in many respects they resemble the scientific narrative in tone and evidential emphasis, are pushed to the margins, where they appear to contend only with the lunatic fringe of the public consensus.

When the public domain is infested with a faux competition between tilted versions of opposing arguments, the chances of the average citizen being able to locate, let alone understand, the arguments on both sides are remote. Instead, most of us are treated to an illusion, slanted parody of the actual issue; a parody replete with accusations of conspiracy, and counter-accusations of conspiracy theory, and largely evidence free. Finding a source that evaluates the arguments in a dispassionate and unbiased way (where are the unbiased news media when we need them?) is too difficult for most people, not because they are too dim to understand, but because they are too immersed in the spectacle to see beyond it. And that, of course, is the point of narrative reality.

Any day now, some enterprising denizen of the C-sphere will propose that the migration of conspiracy theory into the mainstream is a mainstream conspiracy designed to obscure legitimate dissent. Crazy, obviously...



ARMED AND DANGEROUS?

Moonie splinter church gets tooled up and a German WWII weapons nut gets busted



LEFT: Reverend Hyung Jin "Sean" Moon poses for a portrait with his gold AR-15 "rod of iron" at his home in Matamoras, Pennsylvania. BELOW LEFT: Moon's wife, Yeon Ah Lee Moon, at a World Peace and Unification Sanctuary service.

MAGA GUN MOONIES

After Reverend Sun Myung Moon, leader of the Korean-based Unification Church, popularly known as the Moonies, died in 2012, there was bitter infighting among his family as to who was his rightful heir. The struggle eventually resulted in Moon's wife Hak Jar Han becoming the new leader and her sons Hyung Jin "Sean" Moon and Kook-jin "Justin" Moon splitting from the Church. They have since described their mother's rule over the church as "Satanic" and view any "ancestor liberations", a key activity of the Church, carried out under her tenure as invalid due to the holy wine involved being "desecrated".

In 2017, Hyung Jin Moon set up his own version of the Unification Church in the US, known as The World Peace and Unification Sanctuary, but often called the Rod of Iron Ministries. This is backed by Kook-jin Moon, who is now CEO of the US gun manufacturing company Kahr Arms, and supplements its Unification Church-derived theology with an obsession with firearms.



Moon wears a crown of polished bullets as part of his regalia

Hyung Jin, who likes to be known as "The Second King", customarily wears a crown of polished bullets as part of his regalia and has his followers

carry high-powered AR-15 rifles (which he equates with the biblical "rod of iron") during their worship, including at his version of the mass weddings for which his father's church became infamous.

The Moon brothers are also fervent right-wing conspiracy theorists and took part in the 6 January invasion of the US Capital, posting videos of themselves wreathed in teargas. They also use Church channels to claim that Trump won the election as well as raffling off a specially engraved Trump edition AR-15 for church funds. Hyung Jin sees getting involved in politics as vital for defending both the Church and the US from "globalists, Satanists, and political Satanists that want to take power and genocide like-minded communities, and of course, gun-owning communities."

In recent years the Church has held an annual "Freedom Fest" at the Kahr Arms' HQ that brings together a blend of church members, gun activists, right-wing figures like former Trump crony Steve Bannon, Proud Boys associate

Joey Gibson and Republican congressional candidates. At these, Hyung Jin generally turns up wearing his bullet crown and carrying a gold AR-15. Seemingly unconcerned about the US's track record of dealings with paranoid, heavily armed religious sects holing up in remote compounds, The Rod of Iron Ministries has now bought a large property in rural Tennessee as a retreat, which, as well as having a spiritual function, Hyung Jin Moon sees as being a hot-house to develop future right-wing MAGA politicians. They also have a campsite in Texas where Trump flags fly prominently, seeing it as a sanctuary for the Church's "patriots" from the impending war with the "deep state". Whether they actually achieve their aim of becoming a force to be reckoned with on the US political right or remain a fringe sect of rifle fetishists remains to be seen. *vice.com*, 12 Oct 2021.

TANK HOARDER

In Germany, a pensioner has been given a suspended sentence of 14 months and a fine of £200,000 after police discovered a hoard of World War II era weaponry in his home in the northern town of Heikendorf.

Klaus-Dieter Flick, 84, had a vast collection of weapons including an anti-aircraft cannon and a complete Panther tank. Authorities discovered the armoury after searching the house for stolen Nazi-era art in 2015 and removed it with help from the Army – the tank alone took 20 soldiers almost nine hours to extract from the property. As well as the tank and cannon, Flick was also in possession of a torpedo, mortar, 70 assault rifles and more than 2,000 rounds of ammunition. *D. Mail*, 4 Aug 2021.

METEORITE MEDLEY

2021 has been a good year for meteors and meteorites – although one or two landed a bit too close for comfort



ABOVE LEFT: The Wilcock family point to the "splatter" on their drive. ABOVE RIGHT: The Winchcombe meteorite sits on display at the Natural History Museum.

WINCHCOMBE METEORITE

On the evening of 28 February this year a bright, fiery meteor was visible across much of the south of England, causing a sonic boom as it passed. It was tracked by the UK Meteor Network, who received almost 800 sighting reports from Liverpool down to Cornwall, which, along with videos from CCTV, dashcams and video doorbells, enabled them to plot the meteor's path. They concluded that it had hit the ground somewhere between Swindon Village and Bourton-on-the-Hill in Gloucestershire, sparking a search for meteorite fragments across the area.

The next day, what the local paper had described as a "huge space object" was found to be of rather more modest proportions and embedded in the tarmac front drive belonging to the Wilcock family in the Cotswold village of Winchcombe. Hannah Wilcock, 25, said: "When I heard it drop, I stood up and looked out the window to see what was there, but because it was dark I couldn't see anything. It was only the next morning when we went out that we saw it on the drive – a bit like a kind of splatter. And in all honesty, my original thought was – has someone been driving around the Cotswolds lobbing lumps of coal into people's gardens?" The family did, however, contact the Natural

History Museum (NHM), who had been inundated with pictures by hopeful meteorite hunters.

On seeing the Wilcocks' picture, planetary scientist Richard Greenwood said: "It was one of those moments when your legs start going wobbly. I saw this thing; it was like a splat across the [Wilcocks'] drive; and it had all these rays coming off it; and I just thought – that is a meteorite. It was instantaneous." This was the first time in 30 years that a piece of a meteor that had been observed crossing the sky had been successfully recovered from the ground in the UK. It was swiftly retrieved by the NHM and found to be a rare carbonaceous chondrite, prized by researchers because they contain pristine material from the formation of our Solar System 4.6 billion years ago and so can give insights into the process of planet formation. Out of 65,000 known meteorites that have been found, only 1,206 have been witnessed to fall; of these, only 51 are carbonaceous chondrites, and it is the first time this type of meteorite had been found in the UK.

In all, 319g (11.3 oz) of material was collected from the Wilcock's driveway and lawn and the fact that it was retrieved so quickly, within 12 hours of landing, and hadn't been rained on, meant that the quality of the specimen was

"We went out and saw it on the drive – a bit like a kind of splatter"

comparable to what is expected from sampling missions sent to asteroids. Over the next few days additional pieces were retrieved from nearby farmland with the final haul totalling 548g (19.3oz). While scientists are now analysing most of the fragments, some are on display at the Natural History Museum in London, along with the patch of tarmac from the Wilcocks' drive where the first piece was found, carefully excised, and added to the museum collection. gloucestershirelive.co.uk, 1+9 Mar 2021; nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2021/September.

FLASHES AND BOOMS

In recent months there have been a number of spectacular meteors reported streaking across the night sky (when the objects are airborne, they are meteors, once they hit the ground, meteorites). In July, south-east Norway was treated to a display by a meteor that produced several strong flashes of light and a series of loud bangs. Researchers used

video footage from dashcams and security cameras to track its path, and believe it fell to earth in Finnemarka, a wooded region 60km (40 miles) west of Oslo where a group of campers saw the fireball and reported "a large explosion just above their heads". A day later, the American Meteor Society received more than 213 reports of a glowing meteor that was visible from Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and Missouri, accompanied by loud booms, with an unconfirmed report that part of the object had hit the ground near a rural road in Rockwell, Texas. In early September, it was the turn of Brittany and Normandy in France, where another glowing meteor crossed the sky. It was also visible from Southampton and is believed to have fallen in the Channel. Later in the month, North Carolina residents saw a meteor travelling across the state at an estimated 32,000mph (8,889km/h) before disintegrating 28 miles (45km) above Morehead City. More mysteriously, on 10 October New Hampshire was treated to an earth-shaking boom that disturbed people across the state. Initial speculation suggested it was an earthquake, but the US Geological Survey said that none had taken place, and sonic booms from military aircraft were ruled out by the Air



Force. Some flippant commenters thought it might have been a gender reveal party gone wrong (see p6-7), but John Ebel from the Weston Observatory said: "I would look for a natural event, something coming into the atmosphere past the speed of sound, meteor, meteorite, probably causing enough energy to be released that people heard it here down on the ground." Greg Cornwell of the National Weather Service later confirmed this suspicion, reporting that the geostationary weather satellite GOES-16 showed a blue dot flashing over New Hampshire around 11.21am, consistent with a meteorite exploding. *BBC News*, 25 Jul; *[UPI]* 26 Jul; *oust-france.fr*, 6 Sept; *cbsnews.com*, 28 Sept; *yahoo.com/news*, 11 Oct; *boingboing.net*, 13 Oct 2021.

METEORITIC NEAR MISS

Ruth Hamilton of Golden in British Columbia, Canada, was asleep at home when she became vaguely aware of her dog barking; the next thing she knew, she was shocked fully awake by a huge explosion and a shower of debris hitting her in the face. On turning on the lights, she realised something had punched a hole in her bedroom ceiling. She called the police: "Talking to the operator, she was asking me all kinds of questions, and at that point, I rolled back one of the two pillows I'd been sleeping on and in between them was the meteorite." It was melon-sized and had landed just inches from Ruth's head; clearly, it could have been fatal had it struck her. Police initially suspected it was a rock from blasting taking place locally at Kicking Horse Canyon, but construction staff said there had been no blasting going on, although some of the crew had seen a bright light in the sky that exploded and caused some booms. Professor Peter Brown at Western University in London, Ontario, confirmed the rock was a meteorite: "Everything about the story was consistent with a meteorite fall, and the fact that this bright fireball had occurred basically right at the same time made it a pretty overwhelming case." *[UPI]* 12 Oct 2021.



TOP: A meteor streaks across the sky in Spruce Knob, West Virginia, during the annual Perseid meteor shower on 11 August. **ABOVE:** The meteorite that crashed through Ruth Hamilton's bedroom ceiling... **RIGHT:** And where it landed while Ruth was sleeping.

METEORITE HUNTERS

It is estimated that about 500 meteorites survive their fall through the Earth's atmosphere and hit the ground each year. The majority of these are quite small and do not conveniently deposit themselves on someone's pillow. They are of considerable scientific interest but only about two per cent of them are ever recovered; on average, it takes 100 man-hours to find each meteorite fragment. As a result, Robert Citron and his team at the University of California, Davis, have been working on a way to drastically increase the percentage of meteorites recovered. Citron and his team have been using drones to fly a grid pattern over the likely area of a meteorite fall, taking systematic high-resolution



pictures of the ground. These are then processed by an artificial intelligence that has been trained on photographs of meteorites and their impact sites to pinpoint the likely positions of fragments within the search area. The system has performed well in tests where it had to identify meteorites placed by researchers in a lakebed in Nevada and Citron is optimistic about the potential of the system, particularly for finding meteorites in remote regions. *universetoday.com*, 9 Jul 2021.

PULVERISE IT!

While finding small meteorites on the ground is difficult, finding and dealing with much bigger rocks in space that could pose a future threat to the whole planet is even more challenging. While scientists now keep watch for potentially destructive asteroids to give us advance warning of the kind of object that caused the Tunguska Event in 1908 (FT1:12, 189:4), destroyed Tall el-Hammam in antiquity (FT412:14) or wiped out the dinosaurs, they completely missed the meteor that caused extensive damage by exploding over Chelyabinsk in 2014 (FT300:7, 58-59). As a result, even if we are lucky, we may only get short notice of something potentially disastrous coming our way, so we need to be able to respond quickly if we are to do something about it. Now Philip Lubin and his team at the University of California, Santa Barbara, have come up with a new way to defend our planet, a project known as PI (short for "Pulverise It"). Instead of deflecting an incoming space rock, PI involves laying an array of penetrator rods 4-12in (10-30 cm) in diameter and six to 10ft (1.8-3m) long, possibly loaded with explosives, in the object's path. Impact with these penetrators would shatter the object into house-size chunks that would still hit the Earth but would now burn up in the atmosphere, producing a spectacular light show instead of the apocalypse. "If you can reduce the big events, which are dangerous, into a bunch of little events that are harmless, you've ultimately mitigated the threat," said Alexander Cohen, a member of Lubin's team. The advantage of this approach is it does not require any dedicated infrastructure and could be launched at objects some days away using rockets that exist today, or even minutes before impact using ICBM missiles. "Humanity could finally control its fate and prevent a future mass extinction like that of the previous tenants of the Earth who did not bother with planetary defence, the dinosaurs," said Lubin. *phys.org/news*, 13 Oct 2021.

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Updates on stories from previous issues, including Wally on the move and more creepy toy stories.

CORPSE KEEPERS [FT407:8-9]



Police in Hiroshima City, Japan, were surprised to receive an early morning call on their emergency number

from Toshiko Ujibe, 76, who told them: "There's an unpleasant odour coming from my son's corpse, and I don't know what to do." Rather than provide advice about the smell the despatcher instead sent both the police and the fire department to the flat that Ujibe had shared with her 53-year-old son, Kenji (or Satoshi in some reports).

On arrival, they found a man lying face up on his futon with multiple lacerations around his neck; he had clearly been dead for some time. On being questioned, Ujibe said that Kenji had died a while ago, and post-mortem examination showed that her son had probably died 10 or so days earlier, in mid-May. Decomposition made it difficult to determine the exact cause of death, including whether the lacerations had been inflicted before or after Kenji died. As it was not considered likely that she would have called police about the smell if she had killed her son, Ujibe was not held as a suspect in his death but was still arrested on suspicion of violating a law prohibiting a person from damaging, abandoning, or possessing a corpse, which carries a maximum sentence of three years' imprisonment. *Soraneus24.com*, 25 May 2021; *New York Post*, 26 May 2021.

When neighbours noticed a build-up of mail in the doorway of wealthy recluse Bruce Roberts's house in the exclusive North Shore district of Sydney, they called police, who found Roberts, 50, slumped dead over a heater. They also found A\$1million (£548,000) in cash and 19 firearms, but



ABOVE: Emily, the spooky rag doll found by Jonathan Lewis in his new house.

BELOW: Wally the wandering walrus, whose travels have now taken him to Iceland.

as Roberts was a hoarder and the house in a terrible state of disrepair it took more than a year to clear it. It was not until a year into the clearance that the mummified body of Shane Snellman, a known petty criminal last seen in 2002 shortly after being released from jail, was discovered. It seemed that Snellman, 39 at the time of his death, had attempted to burgle Roberts's house and Roberts had shot him dead, then kept the body hidden in a roll of carpet for over 15 years. Also found in the house were 70 cans of air freshener that Roberts had used to mask the stench of the decaying burglar. *Times*, 21 May 2021.

SLENDER MAN [FT316:4, 317:30-37, 320:24, 361:24]



In June, a Wisconsin judge ordered the release of Anissa Weier, 19, from the Winnebago Mental Health Institute. She had been sentenced to 25 years there in 2017 and had served three and a half years for her part in the stabbing of a classmate to please the Slender Man, a character from a Creepypasta meme.

The stabbing, in May 2014, took place because Weier and her friend Morgan Geyser, both 12 years old at the time, believed the Slender Man was real and that if they sacrificed someone to him, they would become his servants and keep him from killing their families. They lured Payton Leutner, also 12, into woods near their homes after a sleepover and Geyser stabbed her 19 times, encouraged by Weier, leaving her for dead. However, Leutner survived, and crawled out of the woods where she was found by a passing cyclist.

Despite prosecution attempts to demonstrate that Weier is still dangerous, Judge Michael Boren agreed to her conditional release. In court Weier vowed she'd never let herself "become a weapon again" and promised to comply with whatever conditions Bohren imposed. As part of these conditions, she will be monitored by Department of Health Services case managers to track her progress until she is 37 years old, the length of her original sentence. Geyser, who was sentenced to 40 years in a mental health facility for her

part in the crime, remains in custody. *yahoo.com*, 1 July 2021.

PORN PAYOUT [FT400:17]



A Michigan federal Judge ordered Beth and Paul Werking to pay \$30,441 (£26,125) to their son David after they threw out his massive collection of pornography and sex toys while he was staying with them after his divorce. The amount was arrived at after a valuation by expert Dr Victoria Hartmann, although even she could not assign a value to 107 of the items. Paul Werking had told his son "Frankly, David, I did you a big favour getting rid of all this stuff", but he did not agree and took them to court. *nypost.com*, 27 Aug 2021

WALLY THE WANDERING WALRUS [FT411:4-5]



Wally the wandering walrus, last reported in Cork, disappeared from the harbour there in early September. After three weeks without a sighting, he turned up in Iceland. Seal Rescue Ireland confirmed that it was indeed Wally after spotting distinctive scars on his flippers in photos from Iceland. To get there, Wally added another 900km (560 miles) to his epic trek, which had already totalled 4,000km (2,485 miles) and taken in Ireland, England, France, Spain and the Scilly Isles.

While Wally's trek seems to be taking him away from Europe and back to his home in the Arctic Circle, on the same day that he was reported in Iceland, another Walrus turned up in the Netherlands, the first seen there in 23 years. It was spotted on the





beach at Schiermonnikoog by Ralf van Hal, a researcher at Wageningen University. Apparently, before turning up on the Dutch coast, the walrus had been spotted off Denmark and Germany, but it doesn't seem to have created quite the media stir that Wally has. *BBC News*, *nltimes.nl*, 21 Sept 2021.

UNSETTLING TOYS [FT411:10]



For fans of unsettling toys, there is now a specific Facebook group, Spooky Doll Hour. It's a group where you can share pictures, memes and videos relating to spooky dolls, but for one hour only each day, 10.16pm – 11.16 pm New South Wales time (UTC + 10). Anyone posting outside that slot is warned that they will be "removed from the group and haunted by a doll for the rest of your life". *Guardian*, 14 Sept 2021.

On moving into his new house in Walton, Liverpool, one of the first things teacher Jonathan Lewis, 32, did was to knock a hole in a plasterboard wall covering a void under the stairs to investigate where a wire was connected. Peering through the hole by the light of a torch, Lewis was startled to find a pair of eyes staring back at him. They belonged to a rag doll – and the rag doll was holding a note. It read "Dear reader/new home owner, thank you for freeing me! My name is Emily. My original owners lived in this house in 1961. I didn't like them so they had to go. All they did was sing and be merry. It was sickening. Stabbing was my choice of death for them so I hope you have knives. Hope you sleep well." Some of Mr Lewis's friends were quite disturbed by the message and urged him to move out immediately, but he is more relaxed about the whole thing, saying: "I'll be honest – I found the whole thing hilarious. I'd probably do the exact same thing." *Liverpool Echo*, 19 Sept 2021.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

CONTEMPORARY FAIRIES #2

Regular readers will remember that the first Fairy Census was published, with 500 accounts, in 2017 (see FT362:30-37) and is available online. As noted in the last edition of this column, I am presently getting ready for a big push to finish Fairy Census 2 (2018-2021). If you have any experiences for the second round, please send them in: a quick Google of 'Fairy Census' will bring you to the right page.

I wrote last month that contemporary fairies from Britain, Ireland and the Isle of Man seem to break down into three roughly equally sized groups. I described the SWFs (small-winged fairies) and the Dwomes (dwarf-gnomes). I neglected, though, the O&Ss (Odds and Sods), the miscellany of 'other' fairies. These include the one-off and incomparable: e.g. walking two-dimensional fluorescent pieces of what looked like cardboard. But there are also some more substantial subcategories. The most numerous are the BOLs (11%): Balls of Light. These are the descendants of the Will-o'-the-Wisp. Sometimes there is one large BOL and sometimes numerous tiny BOLs. I suspect that this category has greatly increased with the arrival of digital cameras and the discovery (often the deliberate search) for fairy BOLs in photos. Next come the Tinies (8%): minute humanoids without wings, usually seen in large groups. "A large tree stump was near

the field gate... I recall at times going there to look at little figures living in the stump and moving around the outside edges as if busy at their business. I could only see them when alone and it was special and magical... I can only say that they were very small and pale." A personal favourite are the Trespers or Tree Spirits (7%). These are typically tall

and thin; sometimes tree-shaped or having branches and so on. They may have rather awkward movements. Trespers are something new in British folklore, but judging from early results from Fairy Census 2, they seem to have put down roots. Think of a less substantial, spiritualised version of the ents from *The Lord of the Rings*. There are then adult-sized fairies (4%), often indistinguishable from 'normal' humans, and fairy animals (3%): dogs, horses and – I love it – multi-coloured ponies. There are finally the

Shadows (3%): blurry or shadowy humanoid or sometimes animalesque forms. Heidi Hollis, note, has written on shadow people from a very different perspective. Where do all these forms come from? Essentially the word 'fairy' has expanded in the last 150 years to include not just social fairies but what folklorists call the solitary fairies. Pretty much anything supernatural that does not come from Hell, from an interdimensional spacecraft or from the tomb is now fairy material...

Simon presents *Boggart and Banshee: A Supernatural Podcast* with Chris Woodyard

"I COULD ONLY
SEE THEM WHEN
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THEY WERE VERY
SMALL AND PALE"



Ufological data dumps

NIGEL WATSON surveys the latest sightings and ufological news from around the world

ICE, ICE, ICER

The renewed and (slightly) more respectful interest in UFOs and UAPs has brought about the launch of the International Coalition for Extraterrestrial Research (ICER). This brings together scientists, academics and ufologists from 27 different countries who believe that UFOs/UAPs are of an extraterrestrial or non-human origin.

ICER has a website, but it only features four articles that proclaim that there is so much UFO evidence now available that scientists can no longer ignore the subject. The 'Evidence' link so far has only a few sample cases from Argentina, and their mission statement seems to be missing; it does, however, have full profiles of its representatives and deputies.

Whether a website and an international organisational structure is enough for ICER to deliver anything more than glib statements about preparing for contact remains to be seen. <https://icer.network/>

ANALYSING UFO DATA

In contrast to large, unwieldy organisations that can be hard to maintain, barrister Isaac Koi has over the past few years coordinated with individuals and groups to scan a vast amount of UFO literature. Much of this material has been scanned and made available by the Archives For the Unexplained (AFU), and is easily available through Isaac's blog page.

Besides long runs of scanned UFO magazines from throughout the world, Isaac is currently uploading UFO articles from mainstream UK and USA magazines from the late 1940s to the 1960s. Having made hundreds of these documents available online, he is now going on to tackle UFO databases and software that can be used to study and make sense of all these archived files. He quotes from the chapter 'Computers in Ufology' in *UFOs: 1947-1987* (Fortean Times, 1987), p245: "Computers are a powerful tool which properly used will give enormous assistance to ufologists the world over... but it should be recognised from the outset that they alone will not answer the questions. [T]he UFO enigma will not be answered by computers but by the talented and intuitive thinking of human minds."

Since the late 1980s numerous databases and lists of databases have been created. Isaac notes that new database projects often do not take into consideration previous projects and there is the danger of people wasting time reinventing the wheel. Fortunately, many published or online



LEFT: My old Spacewagon, full of UFO material; Carl-Anton Mattsson on the left, Clas Svahn on the right.

databases do not overlap as much as we might expect, and Isaac intends to create an extensive listing of them. Notable projects in this area are the International Committee for UFO Research database of international UFO reports and Larry Hatch's UFOCAT.

Isaac also notes other databases have been created that could usefully be expanded. These include lists/databases/indexes of different types of Identified Flying Objects (IFOs), bibliographies, government documents, SETI projects, and UFO/ET themed science fiction. Also there are expert resources, like image analysis software, scanning and digitising software.

So that we can make greater use and sense of all the information that has been exhaustively collected by researchers over several decades, Isaac has created a new UFO data blog to discuss all the issues involved in this ambitious project.

UFO Literature Archives: <https://isaackoiup.blogspot.com/>; *UFO Data:* <https://isaackoidata.blogspot.com/>. Anders Liljegen also discusses the AFU 'New 2019-2020 databases' at: www.afu.se/afu2/?p=8597.

ROAD TRIP

In 2016, Carl-Anton Mattsson and Clas Svahn came over from Norrköping, Sweden, to the UK to collect donations of UFO material for the AFU archives. On their way to Plymouth to collect my files, their car famously broke down and I ended up taking them back to Bob Rickard's home in London. Clas had to have some lengthy discussions with his insurance company – and needed to buy a new car – but at least we had a good chat about UFOs and I got the chance to meet up with Bob after many years.

I was inspired by Peter Rogerson's donation of thousands of his books to the AFU the previous year, and by the fact that my collection of magazines and books was taking up a lot of room. For easy access to specific articles or subjects it is certainly far

better to search online publications, but what you lose is the pleasure of the feel and look of real magazines that you can easily browse through without computer glitches. You win some, lose some!

Clas chronicles his trip to Plymouth and back here: <http://csblogg.ufo.se/csblogg3/?m=20160922> and <http://csblogg.ufo.se/csblogg3/?m=20160923>. For Bob Rickard's article on the work of the AFU, see **F330:46-49**.

UFO GEEK

British ufologist and Flying Disk book publisher Philip Mantle has decided to donate his UFO collection rather than have it all go into a skip. As the "Spaced Out" section of the *Daily Star* website puts it, somewhat rudely, in their headline: "UFO geek sends life's research to be archived – fearing wife will chuck it out when he dies." Philip's files – currently filling his living room and garage – will be sent to the David Marler Historical UFO Archive Collection in Rio Rancho, New Mexico (<https://www.davidmarlerufo.com/>). This archive already holds the files of the late Dr J Allen Hynek, and the NICAP and CUFOs case files. www.dailystar.co.uk/news/weird-news/ufo-geek-sends-lifes-research-25272670

BRITISH UFO INFORMATION OFFICE

Retired West Midlands police officer John Hanson has spent an enormous amount of time and effort publishing his series of *Haunted Skies* books that cover the history of ufology from 1939 to 1990. The early volumes are a comprehensive review of British UFO cases, which include John's own investigations, news reports and statements from witnesses. The latter volumes feature global sightings and he has published separate volumes on Wiltshire cases and the Rendlesham Forest Incident.

The information for these books has been gathered from ufologists throughout the UK, and this is all collected in chronological order in 90 files, which each contain 200 A4 pages. In his 27 years of UFO study he has also accumulated a good collection of journals, periodicals and correspondence. He has now put this together in an accessible manner to form his British UFO Information Office. Any serious researcher who would like to view this material should contact John at: john.hanson.ee@gmail.com. The Haunted Skies website is at: www.hauntedskies.co.uk/index.html.



Liverpool Echoes

JENNY RANGLES goes back to the future as she considers the importance of ufological contexts

I love Liverpool. It's a vibrant friendly city and in the 1980s I spent happy years living on Merseyside where I even had a weekly slot talking about the paranormal and taking calls from listeners at Radio City with presenter Brian Ford. During my time there I investigated many strange tales from locals, but one thing I would never have suggested was that Merseyside is "known as a UFO hotspot to alien enthusiasts" or that some liken it to the Bermuda Triangle.

Yet that odd claim was made in the *Liverpool Echo* this October. You can tell that it originated with the media, as no serious UFO researcher would describe themselves as an "alien enthusiast". Ufology is a quest to solve mysteries – not to hunt for ET – and most of them *are* solved. The story appeared just a few days before Hallowe'en, when 'spooky' stuff – UFOs and aliens included – was filling the media; the brief that week was probably to find a hook to grab the attention of locals.

In truth, Merseyside has its share of UFO incidents – I've written about some here over the years – but it is not a window area, host to the Bootle Triangle, or linked with a major case. However, that did not stop the *Echo* trawling its archives to come up with the proof of Liverpool's special status as the centre of the UFO universe. What did they find? A few fairly mundane cases from the late 1960s, which apparently "gripped Merseyside" and made the city "known as a UFO hotspot".

Quite possibly the writer was not even born 50 plus years ago, or they'd have known that *everywhere* in the late Sixties was "gripped" by UFOs and aliens – largely because for the first time in history we were sending people into space (first Earth orbit; then circling the Moon; then landing on it), and all things extraterrestrial were news. It would be a bit like someone writing in 2071 that Merseyside in 2021 was "gripped by Covid" and therefore a "focus of the global pandemic". One's perspective can change a global event into one with a seemingly local uniqueness that is more apparent than real.

This is more relevant to ufology than you might think, because we all lack perspective on things that happened before our time. Modern ufology (post Kenneth Arnold's 1947 sighting) will have been around for 75 years in 2022, and we lack the 'there at the time' perspective of those who 'created' it and may make similar errors by not



understanding the context in which events were perceived back then.

With the 1947 events, for instance, we see them now in a very "alien" context. With the Arnold case, we see that a well-meaning journalist said that the object flew through the sky like a saucer skipping across water – not a stone, as most people might have said. And the idea of a 'flying saucer' caught on – if it hadn't, would we still be debating the rather duller sounding 'flying stones' in 2021? So small events and nuances do shape history, but history can also shape itself into an image of how events are perceived across subsequent ages. Words matter when they echo through decades and mould perceptions that the author never imagined.

The story that triggered this reverie began with a sighting on 25 October 2021 in Bootle, where I once worked in those long gone, space-struck days, feeding data into a giant computer for a company to pay the bills while science reshaped my future. A witness submitted a video he took near the docks at 8.30am that Monday, and it shows an object passing through the skies on that unusually mild autumn morning. It was reported as a UFO, and – in the true sense of the term – it *was*, as the person who filmed it could not identify it. He suggested it was a comet. It wasn't. But every seasoned ufologist knows "unidentified" and "unidentifiable" are different things – and the former very rarely becomes the latter, as 95 per cent of cases do have an explanation.

For me, this case certainly did. After seeing the images, I checked the air routes to see if there was anything up there that might have caused this riddle and, indeed, there was. Several aircraft overflew Bootle, one being an Emirates Airbus 380 from Toronto to Dubai. The low sun would have illuminated its trail at 37,000ft (11,300m),

but there were other aircraft, too, crossing both ways. Indeed, the witness saw a second 'UFO' there and watched them both fly silently away until mere dots. Can I prove the video shows a jet overflying Bootle, very high up? Probably not. But as with most sightings, a UFO is only unidentified until something that could reasonably identify it shows up through investigation. And the balance of probability then changes. I suspect it was a high-altitude jet and the unusual lighting and weather of this autumn morning made it look odd because conditions were just right. That is my view, although I could be wrong.

UFOs are in some ways a creative process, involving witness, perception, reporting, the mindset of those investigating, and the reasons why others then choose to write about them more widely. My purpose in this article is no less loaded than a newspaper reporter wanting to call Merseyside a "UFO hotspot": rightly or wrongly, I too shaped the data to my needs.

The deeper question is: will a reporter in 2071 rediscover this Hallowe'en story about Liverpool being the focus of an alien invasion in the Sixties and assume it was something more than it ever was in 2021? Not being there at the time removes all context: to figure out what truly happened involves looking back across a lifetime to a day lost in the mists of memory, with any Airbus 380s likely in a museum.

Of course, 1960s Liverpool was the focus of an invasion – not alien, but cultural – via The Beatles and other Merseybeat groups who were playing at the Cavern. Those Cavern performers included my own brother, as it happens: his group is immortalised there today on the wall alongside the better-known household names who played this famous venue. Perhaps I should keep this quiet, in case it too becomes another piece of the puzzle and suggests Liverpool's global musical impact was due to alien intervention. Obviously, nothing of the sort took place – but if we wanted to influence future beliefs that it did, then perhaps a few more coincidences scattered through articles in the *Echo* or *FT* could be fed into the mix, with unexpected consequences at some time beyond our own. Someone might decide to rename what really happened in the city back in those alien-gripped swinging Sixties: no longer Merseybeat, but now *Marseybeat*.

A SHORT HISTORY OF FORTÉAN BOARDGAMES

From the Ouijmania that swept 1920s America to the explosion of pop-cultural products featuring everyone from Bigfoot and Nessie to Kreskin and Uri Geller, bizarre board games have a long and fascinating history. **PETER LAWS** celebrates the fortéan Games of Christmas Past.

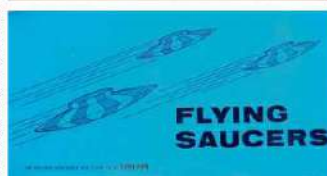
It's sometimes said that playing with supernatural forces "is not a game". Yet in millions of homes around the world, family game night has mixed laughs and friendly competition with a delve into the weird and unexplained. Whether it's contacting dead relatives via *Séance* (1972), sticking pins into a plastic Voodoo dolls with *Mystic Skull* (1964) or honing our spooky sixth sense with *Uri Geller's Strike* (1986), games companies have long known that the world of strange phenomena is not just a source of fascination, but of fun. So, pull up a chair, pick your playing piece and get rolling... as we breeze through a selection of some of the kookiest (and most collectable) vintage fortéan board games.

THE ALIENS ARE COMING

ETs have long hovered over the board game landscape, and back in the late 1940s they were even helping kids learn through play. The Sound Spelling Company tapped into the alien life idealism of the age by releasing *The Flying Saucer Spelling Game*. With its saucer-themed circular board and alien 'World's Fair' artwork, the game saw players turn the rotating inner circle to create as many words as possible. At 49 cents, the cover claimed it was "The World's First PAINLESS speller for Kids from 5 to 90".

More generally, space-themed board games continued into the 1950s and 1960s, from the Earth-to-Saturn space race game *Astron* in 1954 (with its scrolling game board) to games inspired by TV shows like *Lost in Space* (1965) or *Star Trek* (1967).¹ The UFOs were back in 1968 when Funland released the strategy game *Flying Saucers*. Players command a squadron of 12 saucers (plastic discs) travelling across space (a low-fi board filled with coloured circles) while avoiding enemy spaceships. The 1968 Catalogue of Copyright Entries lists it as "An Exciting New Space Age Game".

In 1970, Century 21 Merchandising Ltd released *UFO Red Alert*, based on the Gerry Anderson series *UFO*. Players shoot down flying saucers before they reach Earth (the hit video game *Space Invaders* would reach arcades just eight years later with the same premise). The tri-fold game board and pieces came in a soft, black plastic folder, designed to look like it held top-secret flight plans. The game was available via a mail away offer, with tokens



LEFT: From top to bottom: *The Flying Saucer Spelling Game* (The Sound Spelling Company, 1949); *Flying Saucers* (Funland, 1968); *Sonic UFO* (Waddingtons, 1979); *Sky Travelers* (Family Pastimes, 1989).

from Quaker Oats packets.²

In 1978, Parker Brothers released the official *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* game. Similar to *Battleship*, this game of "concentration and chance" involves players moving their simple pieces across a solemn looking number grid, set against the movie image of UFOs hovering at Devil's Tower, Wyoming. "It's exciting. It's fun. It's unusual," shouted the box. That same year Avalon Hill released *UFO: Game of Close Encounters* with a similarly serious looking grid-board (a running theme with UFO board games). Here players must deploy satellites to identify the "mysterious lights approaching from space... Will you waste your time looking for weather balloons and meteors while the Alien flying saucers slip past?" It also offers the chance to play as the aliens, hiding your craft "among the strange lights in the heavens"; or if you wish, you can flat out invade Earth. The game was originally called *UFO* until Avalon redesigned it to cash in on the movie release. It was one of those rare occasions a company could do so without fear of a trademark dispute from a Hollywood studio, since terms like "UFO" and "Close Encounters" were pre-existing classifications.

The aliens kept on coming in 1979 when Waddingtons released *Sonic UFO* (aka *UFO Signal*). Players attempt to land their alien craft on Earth. Unique features include a mask that prevents players from seeing one another's moves and a battery-powered flying saucer that beeps to indicate its location. That same year, Metagaming released *Invasion of the Air Eaters*, a dice roll, grid movement game depicting an alien invasion in 1983. In the actual year 1980, players could experience HG Wells's invasion classic *War of the Worlds*, with a map-based strategy game of the same name – presumably while listening to Jeff Wayne's epic musical adaptation, which had only been released two years earlier.

In 1989, the aliens got less homicidal, when Family Pastimes published *Sky Travelers*, an alien game fit for the positive-minded New Age. In this "co-operative science fiction game" you play as pacifist visitors from outer

space who must search the board (featuring Earth's mountains and forests) to gather parts to repair your damaged craft. Since you hail from a planet of peace, you must avoid the UTOCs of Earth (Ugly Things Out of Control). These are shown as cards featuring "Killer Bees", "Crazed Animals", "Nuclear Accidents", "Water Pollution" and "Racial Feuding". Any attempt to use violence in the game will cause your alien being to disintegrate. That same year, Steve Falcone released *U.F.O.ria* (publisher unknown), a board game that featured ESP cards and trivia questions that promised to "Explore the UFO Phenomenon". It allowed players to "discover which celebrities and historical persons have had UFO sightings... an adventure that will change the way you think about UFOs".³

More recent years have brought the popular and innovative *XCOM: The Board Game* (Fantasy Flight, 2015) where players defend against alien invasion. For a sillier but fun UFO experience, 2014's *Alien Invasion* (aka *UFO Alarm*) from University Games is a farm-based invasion game. It's notable for featuring a large plastic UFO which physically abducts foam cattle by vacuuming them up a transparent tube and has been described as "Ludo on steroids".

BIGFOOT AND FRIENDS

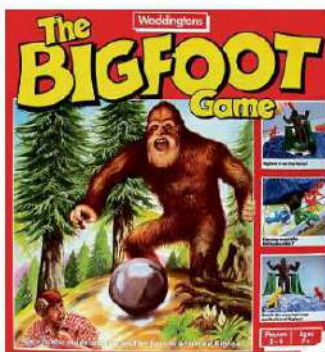
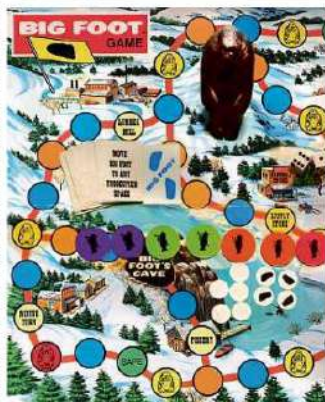
Those camera-shy cryptids may be a pain to witness in the field, but "hidden animals" have been highly visible in a surprising number of family games. Taking us into Abominable Snowman territory was *Expedition to the Himalayas* (release date unknown, estimated late 1950s/early 1960s).⁴ The game was released by The Granada Novelty Company in London and picked up on the public's fascination with the Yeti, which had been growing ever since British Mountaineer Eric Shipton took the first photographs of Yeti tracks in 1951 (see FT230:11). A series of high-profile expeditions followed, including one in 1954 funded by the *Daily Mail*, which claimed to bring back hair specimens. All this Yeti news fired imaginations in the 1950s and now families could follow in the creatures' footprints themselves with a board game.

Strangely, this Yeti game was themed around "TV's popular pair" Arthur Haynes and Nicholas Parsons. The latter was best known as the suave and clipped presenter of the TV show *Sale of the Century* and Radio 4's *Just a Minute*, but in the 50s-60s he was the straight man to Haynes, who the *Radio Times* called "the forgotten king of comedy".

Two-four players become mountaineers, and on the turn of the cardboard spinner, you leave basecamp and trek up a winding slope, avoiding pink hazard spaces that activate disasters like "avalanche", "rope severed" and "food supplies mislaid". The real worry is the mysterious tracks of "The Snowman" straying onto the trail. The giant, friendly looking Yeti watches over proceedings from the side of the mountain and is, for the record, bright yellow.

By the 1970s, the Yeti had been firmly replaced by Sasquatch in the public imagination, not least because of the Charles B Pierce scary movie documentary *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (see FT223:44-49) in 1972. By 1977

FASHIONED AS A PLASTIC FIGURE, THE LEGENDARY BEAST STOMPS AROUND THE GAME BOARD



ABOVE: From top to bottom: *Expedition to the Himalayas* (Granada Novelty Company, 1950s); *Big Foot* (Milton Bradley, 1977); *The Bigfoot Game* (Waddingtons, 1987). RIGHT: The splendid plastic Bigfoot on his plastic mountain, from *The Bigfoot Game*.



the hefty hominid was so popular he'd even appeared in four episodes of *The Six Million Dollar Man* (plus one episode of spin-off series *The Bionic Woman*). That same year also saw a live-action kids series called *Bigfoot & The Wild Boy* about a young man having weekly adventures with the Sasquatch that raised him. Bigfoot action figures were one way to get kids playing with the monster, but the beast made its way to the dining table via MB Games, which brought out *Big Foot* in 1977. And yes, they did spell it as two separate words.

Players move around the board, prospecting for gold in the Alaskan mountains. Yet "the dreadful Big Foot" is a constant threat to life. Fashioned as a brown, hulking, plastic figure, the legendary beast stomps around the board and leaves footprints via the hidden game cards loaded into its base. If Big Foot squashes his big foot on you, you "must leave the mountains forever", implying death. Players can self-preserve by getting Bigfoot to kill other players first. The box confusingly described this as "The Giant Snow Monster Game", which seems less out of place in the overseas editions; after all, MB rebranded the game as Yeti for the global market.

That same decade Mego Toys brought out *The Bigfoot Game* in which players track the monster "through dangerous jungles and over perilous mountains". A small Bigfoot figure is placed inside the moulded plastic mountain on the board. The spinner inside means some hunters find the monster and others see nothing. A lot like real life.⁵

Bigfoot would hit the boards again in 1987 when Waddingtons released *The Bigfoot Game* (all one word, this time). Here, a yellowish plastic Bigfoot looms from a plastic mountain in the centre of the board, kicking boulders into the path of monster hunters.

Lake and sea monsters got a look-in too; undersea creatures attack divers in *Monsters of the Deep*, produced by Whitman in 1976. A more serious take arrived in 1986 with *Nessie Hunt* (see side panel). More generally, monsters of all sorts have been a staple of the board game landscape for decades. *The Slime Monster Game*, from Mattel in 1977, features a giant, green plastic creature vomiting actual slime on the wipeable players and board. *The Purple People Eater*, from Waddingtons in 1982, has a bizarre jelly-like creature whose eyes light up in anger, as his tentacles "quiver on your hand! ... Will you be able to rescue the people through his gaping jaw?"

The board game market of recent years has exploded in terms of variety and includes a welcome parade of cryptozoology-themed games. There are too many to mention, but standouts include the minimalist charmer *Yeti in The House* (Itten, 2018). Here, the Yeti

player takes grainy, blurred pictures of wooden shapes hidden around the home, then the other players must search for the creature using the frustratingly unclear photographs. *Cryptid* (Osprey Games, 2018) cleverly explores the cut-throat nature of modern-day

THE RISE AND FALL OF NESSIE HUNT

COURTESY DEREK COLCLOUGH

When Tony Harmsworth was 10 years old, he flicked through the pages of the 1959 edition of *The Eagle* comic. He was so taken by the sight of a Venusian lake monster attacking Dan Dare that he sought out the nearest beast he could find on Earth. He looked to Loch Ness. Now, over 60 years later, he's made a career of drawing people to the mysterious waters. In 1980 he helped set up the Loch Ness Centre & Exhibition and established the award-winning Discover Loch Ness tour company. He was the administrative coordinator of Operation Deepscan in 1986/7.

He also created the impressive board game *Nessie Hunt*, which comes with 250 components, including 180 game cards, four plastic expedition leader figures, Nessie money, a large folding game board and, of course, a plastic 'head and neck' Nessie. The box asked: "Can you solve the age-old mystery with this exciting educational family game?" Use sonar, cameras, video, and collective eyewitness reports in your fascinating search for the Loch Ness monster. Based on the real search at Loch Ness. "Despite the ambition of the game, or perhaps even because of it, *Nessie Hunt* would prove to be a troubled project.

Tony knew he'd need help with producing and marketing his game and so he brought in a friend called John Atkins. John had been in sales since leaving the RAF, so he became sales director in exchange for a decent chunk of the *Nessie Hunt* equity. Then, with a risk-free grant from the Highlands and Islands Development Board, a small business loan from the Bank of Scotland and investment from friends and family, the funding was in place to create the game. Then troubling news surfaced: another group was also working on a Loch Ness Monster game.



TOP: Derek Colclough's photograph of a diver holding the game aloft as he emerges from the waters of Loch Ness.

Concerned that a rival would affect *Nessie Hunt*'s chances, they bought the competitor out and production began.

The first 60 copies of the game were sent straight to the Loch Ness Centre and Exhibition in Drumnadrochit, a short walk from the Loch itself, where a steady stream of game sales might be expected from the 100,000 visitors each year. Sales from other tourist locations were also part of the plan, and Tony was set to visit the International Toy Fair in Earls Court, London,

hoping to break the game into the world market; but then he received a shock.

He visited the Loch Ness Centre Shop (with two dozen extra games loaded in the boot of his car) to check on sales. "I was dismayed to find that they had only sold two games," he remembered. This lack of interest was reflected across the other shops that stocked it.

Worried about the financial implications, Tony and his team decided to press on with the International Toy Fair.

Perhaps that might give the game the push it needed. Sure enough, *Nessie Hunt* made a splash in London. The game beat *Transformers* to win "Best New Product of 1987", and Tony's late brother-in-law Derek Colclough won an award for the best press photograph at the fair with a diver bursting out of the loch and holding the game aloft, all in sight of Urquhart Castle. Tony even appeared on the TV shows *Wogan*, *Saturday Superstore* and *No 73* promoting the game. Yet even with enthusiastic PR support from then Doctor Who Colin Baker, sales were slow. One of the issues was price. "It had been too well made and the content too lavishly produced. One retailer asked why we had bothered putting pictures on the game cards. My explanation that a *Nessie* game should have pictures of *Nessie* in it was met with, 'You could have done that in the second edition'. And, of course, he was right."

Tony was plagued by Catch 22s. He was advised that a full advertising campaign would save the game, but they needed to fund that with game sales. Woolworths and WH Smith said they loved *Nessie Hunt*... but would only commit to buying units in big numbers after the ad campaign was launched. "I was snookered," Tony said.

And so, despite the awards and praise, *Nessie Hunt* gradually vanished from shelves. Today, it's not quite as elusive as the beastie itself, but it's close. Now and then it raises its lonely head on eBay... then sinks without a trace. But if you want a slice of forlorn board game history, Tony is still selling them. At the time of writing, he has a mere 12 left (£75 + postage). You can net one of these noble stragglers yourself, and read more about Tony's fascinating life with *Nessie* by visiting www.harmsworth.net/#lochness.



monster research. Players take on the roles of cryptozoologists who must not only study footage, gather evidence and track down the elusive creatures of the world, but must also deceive other hunters to ensure their place in the history of cryptid research.

GHOSTLY GAMES

Board games got spooky with *Haunted House* (Ideal, 1962), which offers a particularly elaborate board, moulded from 3D plastic into a forbidding, Gothic castle. The house was so hefty it required two metal stands to keep it upright, and it came with a “Hooting Owl Spinner”, “Spooks Behind Doors!” and a “Hidden Jewel in the Attic!” Three years later, Ideal played on the spectral appearance of spooks by marketing what they claimed was the world’s first glow-in-the-dark game: *Green Ghost* featured a unique board, raised on stilts with trapdoors. Spinning the luminous Green Ghost determined who would win the game. In the years that followed, glow-in-the-dark components became a natural addition to supernatural board games, including *Ka-Bala*, a bizarre Ouija-style talking board game with a huge eye in the centre. (See *Ouija Panel* for more). In 1975 *Mostly Ghostly* asked players to turn out the lights and turn the spinner. The first person to build their glow-in-the-dark skeleton wins.

Séance (MB, 1972) is a unique game themed on money and necromancy which features a large and handsome 3D cardboard diorama. Three to four players gather in the ornate mansion office of the now deceased Uncle Everett. They must place cash bids on his possessions while his disembodied spirit talks, advises and chastises from within a large séance table. The voice of the ghost comes courtesy of a plastic record player hidden inside the table. Halfway through the game the disc is flipped and the true value of the items are finally revealed. Things get spookier still when the winner of the game is instructed to turn off the lights, and the players must stare at the portrait of Aunt Zelda... where the face of Uncle Everett appears! Copies of the game are rare today but can sometimes be found on auction sites for around £200.

In 1974’s *Scream Inn* (Strawberry Fayre) players attempt to creep out of a spooky inn without disturbing the ghosts that hide under beds and floorboards. It was based on a 1973 comic strip of the same name by Brian Walker that ran for 79 issues in IPC’s *Shiver and Shake* comic before moving to *Whoopee* the following year.

Perhaps one of the most recognisable haunted house games is *Ghost Castle* (1985). This was an update of the classic 1970 Milton Bradley game *Which Witch?* (which, somewhat confusingly was published in Britain by Denys Fisher as *Haunted House*). Originally designed by the same team who made *Mousetrap* and *Operation*, *Ghost Castle* came in various incarnations. The UK edition features a tall plastic tower in the centre of the board and a glow-in-the-dark skull. The game is now licensed to the Scooby-Doo brand. 1991 took the ghosts to sea with *Ghostly Galleon* from



THE VOICE OF THE GHOST COMES FROM A HIDDEN PLASTIC RECORD PLAYER

LEFT: From top to bottom: *Haunted House* (Ideal, 1962); *Haunted House* (Which Witch in the US, later remade as *Ghost Castle*, MB 1970); *Séance* (MB, 1972); *Scream Inn* (Strawberry Fayre, 1974); *Atmosfear*, complete with a VHS tape (Spear Games, 1991).

Waddingtons, in which Blackbeard’s Ghost could either help or hinder players while moving across a 3D ghost ship.

That same year saw the release of a board game that was considered pretty hi-tech for the time. *Atmosfear* (aka *Nightmare*, Spear Games, 1991), brought a brand-new element to the gaming table: an actor. The game featured a graveyard board and was ‘hosted’ by the unhinged (and seemingly undead) Gatekeeper via a VHS tape. He verbally abuses players throughout – calling you a “maggot” – and forces everyone to address him with, “Yes, my Gatekeeper”. If the tape runs to the 60-minute mark, the Gatekeeper wins. Belarusian actor Wenanty Nosul played the role, and a series of games followed.

The success of the TV show *Most Haunted* didn’t only help spark an explosion of paranormal investigation groups, it also gave us the board game *Yvette Fielding’s Ghosts* (Orchid Game Studios, 2006). Players take on the role of “intrepid investigators” searching for “the answer to the ultimate question: is there Life After Death?” Played over the course of one night, the game pits investigators against ghosts who will avoid capture, scare the team, or possess either them or their equipment, which includes an Audio Recorder, Locked Off Camera, Thermometer and EMF Reader.

More recent ghost-themed games include the fascinating *Mysterium* (Libellud, 2015) where players become spirit mediums who “must divine spectral visions to solve the murder of a restless ghost”. In *Paranormal Detectives* (Lucky Duck, 2019) one player takes the role of a ghost while the others work as paranormal investigators, using “various occult methods” to figure out how the victim died.

MISC MYSTERIES

As well as the big hitters above, you’ll find plenty of other fortune topics rendered into the board game format. For example, astrology, ESP and mind reading found a natural home in the suspenseful and strategic world of board games.

In 1964, Japanese company Takara released *Strategy Astrology Game*, which works like a Zodiac-themed game of roulette. In 1967, Milton Bradley put out *Kreskin’s ESP*, which asked if players might have Extra Sensory Perception (See side panel for our interview with Kreskin on the game).

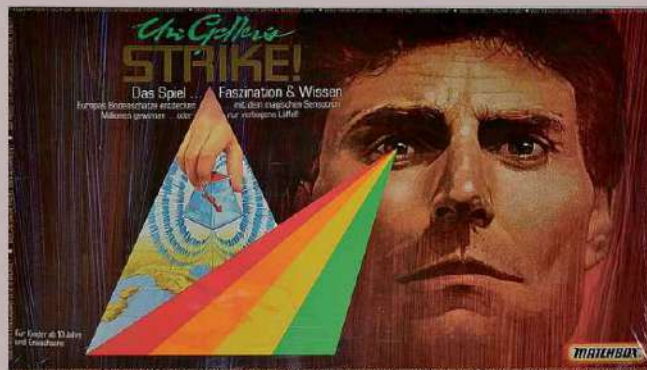
Astrology: The Game of Prediction has an interesting fourteen pedigree. Released by Dynamic Games in 1972, it was created by Vicki Bootman and Margaret Gaddis, a practising astrology consultant. Margaret’s husband was none other than fourteen writer Vincent Gaddis, who famously coined the phrase “The Bermuda Triangle” in a 1964 edition of *Argosy Magazine*. Margaret had co-written

URI GELLER ON HIS BOARDGAME, STRIKE!

Uri Geller is famously adept at fusing the fortune world with pop culture, so perhaps it was only a matter of time before his face wound up on a board game. That time came in 1986, when *Uri Geller's Strike!* was released by Matchbox. The box promises players "a mind-bending experience!" discovering the hidden treasures of Europe. An intense painting of Geller's face dominates the box, with a rainbow laser beaming from his eye.

The inventive game system combined a board which showed a grid map of Europe, trivia questions (*Trivial Pursuit* was huge at the time) and also the mysterious movement of a "Sensotron". These transparent, plastic pyramids would magically shake and point downwards over certain locations, indicating precious minerals underneath – all thanks to magnets inside the board itself. The board could even be shaken to give a new simulated dowsing experience each time. A search of the Internet found a common assumption in blogs and reviews: that Matchbox invented the game and just slapped Geller's name on it to harness a bit of star power. Suspicious that this theory might not be accurate I phoned Geller in Israel. He was keen to share his memories of *Strike!*

Uri's version of the game's genesis was as follows: "Well, Matchbox approached me to do a series of Uri Geller games. I came up with a concept that would encompass



skills of luck and intuition, and so we created *Strike!* Basically, it was created after my success in the world of dowsing."

The game was obviously designed to be a fun experience, but did he

think a board game could genuinely train people in harnessing their intuitive skills?

Uri believed that, to some degree, it could. "We all have intuitive energies, powers, call it whatever you

LEFT: Uri plugs the game in 1986 – note his snazzy "Uri Geller's Strike" emblazoned jacket!

like. But some people have it to a heightened degree. Those people tend to be successful in business, family, and love. I can't call intuition ESP, but it's definitely in the arena of the sixth sense... and more. So, I believe that when you play games such as *Strike!* or any other game, you are absolutely training yourself automatically and you are sharpening your intuition."

Her went on to tell me that he keeps a copy of *Strike!* in The Uri Geller Museum in Old Jaffa, Israel, which has recently reopened after Covid closures. As well as the board game, visitors can enjoy guitars from the Rolling Stones, Salvador Dali sculptures and even the Uri Geller Peace Cadillac, encrusted with 2,000 spoons once owned by Picasso, Richard Nixon, The Spice Girls, Chopin, and Pope Francis.

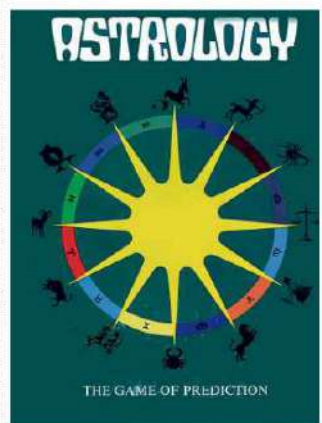


two books with Vincent, *The Strange World of Animals and Pets* (1970) and *The Curious World of Twins* (1972) as well as writing astrology columns for *Fate*, *Occult Magazine* and *Everyday Astrology*. She designed the game to enable between two and 10 players to “orbit through the Zodiac” by moving their pieces around the board. Along the way, they gained insights into the Zodiac and how it affects “emotions, actions and abilities”. The aim was to become the “Star Oracle”. The instruction booklet casually mentions that, “in addition, each player will be able to foretell his own future by the end of the game.”

That same year, Dynamic Design Games⁶ also released *ESP: The Game of Perceptive Skill*. Packaged in a similar way to *Astrology*, this board game was designed to help players develop telepathic powers. Players are encouraged to play with friends because “telepathy works best among people who know each other”. Players use ESP to determine numbers within the thoughts of their opponents. To be deemed the winner of the game, one simply has to be the “most adept psychic among the players”. In 1986 players had the chance to hone their dowsing skills in the company of one of the most famous icons of ESP, with *Uri Geller's Strike* (see side panel for our interview with Uri on the game).

1971 brought *Reincarnation* from Dorwin Associates, which boasted a striking and sombre black and white cover announcing that this is an “Adult Game”. Players roll the “Astragali Bones” (a reference to the animal knucklebones commonly used in gambling during ancient times, the forerunner to modern dice) and consult the “Karma Cards” to discover who they were in a past life and where they lived. The game board map includes the lost continents of Atlantis and Lemuria. 1988 brought another reincarnation game called *Past Lives*, from the Avalon Hill Game Company. Players are taken through Ancient Times, Dark Ages, Age of Kings and The Industrial Age. At the end, they consult the Book of Past Lives and are assigned the life of a genuine historic figure.

Fortean favourite the “Bermuda Triangle” had certainly stirred the waters of public interest in the 1970s, from Charles Berlitz’s “shockwave bestseller” on the subject in 1974 to a clutch of movies and 1977 appearances in *Wonder Woman*, *Scooby-Doo* and *In Search Of*. MB games got in on the action early with the board game *The Bermuda Triangle* in 1975 where players move plastic ships containing magnets across a map of the Triangle, trying to avoid the “Sinister Mystery Cloud”. This plastic, planchette-like piece moves across the board and “Swallows Ships!” (well, picks them up via its magnetic base). The box cranked up the suspense with this threatening line in caps: “Will your fleet become just one more VICTIM OF THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE?” In 1982, the Atari 2600 gaming system would pixelate the phenomenon with Data Age’s *Bermuda Triangle*.



LEFT: From top to bottom: *Mystic Skull* (Ideal, 1964); *Voodoo Doll Game* (Schaper, 1967); *Astrology* (Dynamic Games, 1972); *Voice of the Mummy* (MB, 1971); *The Bermuda Triangle* (MB, 1975).

Ancient curses and doomed expeditions found their way into board games too. In 1971 MB Games brought out *Voice of the Mummy*, which uses the same voice technology employed by *Séance* a year later. This time, though, players are trekking around an elaborate, talking sarcophagus that cries: “Look out! The unholy snakes of Amon reach from below... move up one level.” 1978’s *The Curse of Tutankhamun* is an educational indie game, published in conjunction with a touring King Tut Exhibition in the US. It features a laminated map-sheet in a tube. The first player to avoid cursed squares and reach King Tut’s burial room is the winner. The success of the *Indiana Jones* movies revived interest in weird archaeology and brought a string of games that played on themes of lost treasures and their attendant curses. In *Curse of the Cobras* (Ideal, 1982) players pluck (plastic) Egyptian Ankhs from a golden (plastic) sarcophagus. If the trap is triggered, a mummy awakens and traps the players hand with (plastic) cobras. In 1990, *Curse of the Idol* let players raid a temple to capture a Bloodstone – all played out on an impressive 3D board.

African magic feature in Ideal’s earlier *Mystic Skull – The Game of Voodoo* from 1964, which sees players become witch doctors, casting hexes on their opponents. It’s a particularly macabre experience, featuring zombies, spiders, snakes, and shrunk heads. Players stick pins into played plastic dolls while a human bone cooks in a cauldron, sitting on a gnarled plastic tree in the centre of the board. “When the mystic skull contacts a spirit from the GREAT BEYOND, it will quiver.” 1967 brought *Voodoo Doll Game* from Schaper, whose cover rightly insists that it’s for “boys and girls”. Players would take turns pushing pins into a plastic voodoo doll. If you choose the wrong hole, you trigger a booby trap – and out comes a furious witch doctor from a mud hut.

A particularly curious fortan mashup came in the form of *Crop Circles – Mystery Adventure Board Game*, which became tangled up in the events of Operation Blackbird in 1990. (See side panel for more on this curious story).

The X-Files phenomenon of the 1990s brought a resurgence of fortan interest. Board games followed, with the officially licensed *X-Files Trivia Game* (20th Century Fox, 1997). Perhaps inspired by the success of *Atmosfear*, the game features a VHS tape with clips from the show. Lagoon Games tried to cash in on the brand that same year with *X is for UnExplained*, a sort of paranormal Trivial Pursuit in which players travel around a large X-embazoned board while avoiding Hoax cards and answering questions on “UFO Sightings”, “Psychic Phenomena”, “Alien Abduction” and other subjects.

KRESKIN'S E.S.P.

The Amazing Kreskin is a world-renowned mentalist from America (see **FT162:20**). He was huge in the 1960s and 1970s, appearing on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* many times. In 1967, he worked with Milton Bradley to create the board game *ESP*, which came complete with a swinging pendulum and also had an accompanying vinyl album from International Records. I asked Kreskin about the game and its impact...

"I'd been designing a game that I felt could tap into the unconscious, and yet make use of an item that has found its way through decades in various scenarios, including occult situations, and that was the pendulum. This was not meant to be a fortune telling device, and while the package appeared as a game, it became expanded remarkably for many people as a *tool*. It soon became a device that businessmen would use to tap into questions they had in mind. For this reason, the game expanded as a powerful part of my career."

How involved was he in the creation and design of *ESP*?

"In designing the game over a period of many months, I had the opportunity of privately testing it in a variety of settings, including an office which I had for eight years with a clinical psychologist, Dr Harold Hansen. His quarters were in the Essex County area of New Jersey, and I would see sometimes as many as 30 of his patients a week and would use certain areas of the pendulum for therapeutic purposes. It became clear to me that a certain percentage were using the device for personal and business reasons to tap into their inner thoughts.



ABOVE: The Amazing Kreskin and his amazing ESP game.

Having been involved in over 86 crime cases as a consultant for law enforcement, I used the game as a convenient tool in investigating a crime. The version designed for businessmen sold thousands."

Kreskin's high profile on TV was a big help in promoting the game, which, he recalled, "ended up being played on almost every major television talk show, around the world, even when I went to Japan. It was played in languages I didn't even speak, and this fascinated Johnny Carson."

Kreskin clearly still has a soft spot for the game. "I own copies of the various versions. I have used it hundreds of times as a demonstration. One of the

dramatic moments, both publicly and privately, took place when the Milton Bradley company gifted me with a handmade wooden, one-of-a-kind version of the game, which I have on display in my office. It was made for me in celebration of the over one million copies of the game being sold in a little over a year."

It's now more than half a century since the game's creation, and I wondered when was the last time Kreskin had actually played it.

"That was probably only weeks ago, but I did not play it as a game. I used it as a demonstration. I suspect each year that I probably demonstrate this version of the game on dozens and dozens of occa-

sions. Understand that the game was never promoted by yours truly as an occult piece, but the fact that it dealt with tapping into the unconscious gave it tremendous appeal... an appeal that at times became special in individuals' lives that were searching for other avenues of solutions and communication. Don't you know that some of the seminars I've presented though the years brought the game into a setting in which as many as 700 people sat in an auditorium, each participating with a game in their laps? I've done scenarios on the Internet with private programmes in which people purchased tickets to be involved with the game."

OUIJA: THE MOST FORTLEAN BOARD GAME OF ALL.

Any discussion of fortune board games must surely include that slumber party favourite, the Ouija board, which manages to straddle the status of harmless parlour game and gateway to Hell. This combination of a lettered board with a small wooden pointer proved to be a rather nifty piece of ghost tech, born perhaps out of annoyance more than anything else. After the Fox sisters famously contacted the dead in 1848, Spiritualism became an international obsession, particularly for Americans desperate to connect with their beloved Civil War dead. Yet techniques of table tilting, rapping and automatic writing using fiddly planchettes with pencils attached were, quite frankly, a bit of a faff, especially when one often had to rely on a specialist medium to interpret all those knocking sounds or chaotic squiggles on paper.

So, when an alphabet board with a separate indicator emerged it simplified and democratised necromancy, and even made it fun. On 8 March 1886, the *New York Tribune* ran an article called "The New Planchette", which listed at least seven Ohio cities going "wild over the 'talking board'." This "perfect craze" had now "taken the place of card parties" as an evening entertainment, and the article gave detailed instructions (with a diagram) allowing readers to make a talking board of their own.

The growing demand for these fun, spooky (and most importantly, easy to make) games quickly saw the appearance of pre-made boards, but it was Charles Kennard of Baltimore, Maryland, who was the first to spot a serious business opportunity. He set up the Kennard Novelty Company to produce the boards, which became hugely popular, with an ad in the *The Sunday Herald* of 21 December 1890 hailing "The Ouija: The Wonder of the 19th Century". "By simply resting the fingers of two persons upon the small table it moves, and to all intents and purposes becomes a living sensible thing giving intelligent answers to any questions that can be propounded... for sale by all first-class Toy Dealers and Stationers!"

Kennard, along with a group of investors, patented the device soon after, on 10 February 1891⁷ and assigned the rights to the Kennard Novelty Company. The granting of the patent was a story in itself, since Kennard knew that the application would fail unless he could demonstrate that the board actually worked. So, he took a medium called Helen Peters with him when he filed the application in Washington. Sure enough, the chief patent



officer demanded evidence and asked that the board spell out his name – he'd kept this information hidden up till then. Perhaps the spirits of the dead intervened, or maybe Elijah Bond, Kennard's patent attorney, had ascertained the man's name already. Whatever the explanation, a presumably shaken patent officer granted the request that same day under the description of a "toy or game". Bond, also the brother-in-law of Helen Peters, was listed as its inventor.

How exactly they came up with the name "Ouija" isn't clear. Popular belief says it's the combination of the French and German words for yes: *oui* and *ja*. Others claim the board simply named itself after Kennard and Peters asked it to: it supposedly explained that this strange word meant "good luck". Then, Peters revealed that a locket around her neck held a picture of a woman she

admired called "Ouija", although it's possible this may have been the famous author and women's rights activist Ouida.⁸

However its name came about, the Ouija board made money, and the business changed hands until the rights to manufacture were leased to shop foreman and soon-to-be-entrepreneur William Fuld, who – apparently instructed by the board itself – built a three-storey factory in 1918 and started producing units in record numbers. With a knack for publicity and an eye for design, Fuld added the famous Sun and Moon icons, and by 1920 the Ouija board made him a millionaire. The *New York Times* said the boards were as popular as bubble-gum. That same year, the music for "The Great Ouija Board Song – Weege, Weege, Tell Me Do" was released, the board as "The Craze of the Country". On 16 May 1920, the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a cover story titled "Ouijmania – The Strangest Craze of All".

Just two weeks earlier, Norman Rockwell had even painted a couple playing with the board for the 1 May 1920 cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. His inspiration for the piece? The previous summer he'd attended a New York dance hall where dancing wasn't the only fun on offer. Ringing the perimeter of the floor Rockwell saw several couples sitting knee to knee and moving planchettes across Ouija boards.⁹ Ouija ads from this period reflect this aspect of the board, often showing a young man and woman enjoying the mysterious romance of a 'talking board' date. As we'll see, this dating angle for Ouija ads would continue for decades.

William Fuld ran the company for 26 years, until it killed him on 24 February 1927. He had climbed onto the factory roof to replace a flagpole, but an iron support gave way and he fell backwards, tumbling through the air. He managed to grab an open window, but couldn't hold on and plunged three stories to the ground. Despite his multiple injuries, it



LEFT: From top to bottom: Ouijmania inspired its own song, "Weegee, Weegee, Tell Me Do"; the classic Ouija board design, with the Sun and Moon icons added by William Fuld, as produced by Parker Brothers; the *San Francisco Chronicle* of 16 May 1920 reports on "the strangest craze of all".

A BOARDGAME FROM AN ALIEN?

In the summer of 1990, a board game would find itself at the centre (quite literally) of the crop circle phenomenon. Operation Blackbird was already into its second night. This high profile, three-week investigation into crop circles was partly funded by the BBC programme *Pebble Mill*, but mostly by Nippon TV from Japan, and was led by researchers Colin Andrews and Pat Delgado. The aim was to record evidence of crop circle activity with an array of equipment including cameras, plus heat, light, and sound detectors. On the second night, Wednesday 25 July, the team recorded flashing orange lights in the next field, which belonged to a farmer called Jonathan King. By the next morning, two large crop circles, along with four smaller circles and lines, had appeared.

Hopes of a breakthrough in cerealological research were dashed when mysterious items were found in the centre of every circle, each weighted down with two rough wooden sticks in the shape of a cross. The nation got to see what was under those sticks in a BBC news report, led by a smirking Nicholas Witchell in the studio. On-site reporter Clarence Mitchell crouched among the flattened crops and held the proof of the hoax up for the camera. "A paper board game," he said, "similar to a Ouija board." An ITN report on the same incident didn't just say they were "similar" to a Ouija board, but that they *were* Ouija boards.

They weren't. The objects were disc-shaped paper boards from the self-published game *Crop Circle: Mystery Adventure Board game*. In the game, players become Druids or aliens who must place an altar in the centre of a miniature Stonehenge made of blocks. Once the Sun and Healing Circles are brought into the Eastern Ley Line, Summer Solstice is declared, and the game is won. The creator was Magic Merlin, aka George



Vernon, an author and artist from Bristol who claimed an alien had chosen him as a vessel to produce the game. We'll hear more from George later, but first back to Operation Blackbird.

Naturally, Andrews and Delgado were disappointed and embarrassed at what seemed like a prank-cum-publicity-stunt. The team decided that the equipment readings from the night before were probably just heat signatures from the hoaxers who were flattening the corn with wire (and presumably placing the boards, too). Closer inspection showed that the formation lacked the precision of previous circles. The ITN report joked that the wonky lines were "a disgrace to anyone from outer space". The Blackbird team saw little to laugh about. "It's funny

for about 60 seconds," a frustrated Andrews told reporters. "Then, I find it very sad."

The plot thickened the next day, when Andrews received a handwritten letter dated 25 July 1990. It claimed to be from the dance music group KLF, who wrote: "Colin, the circles on Wednesday were just a hoax, but we can't help to play jokes! Inconvenience caused? We're sorry... To catch us you'll have to hurry! Yours, in total control, the Justified Ancients of Mu Mu aka The Jammies." The note featured certain characters that were written backwards: N, R, S, E, K, D and ?.

Was the letter really sent by the KLF? For a band who loved to work with cryptic enigmas, the letter reads as a little bit obvious and 'on-brand'. Plus, they refer

to themselves as "The Jammies", a name they had largely ceased to use in the 1990s in favour of "The KLF". Still, I compared the handwriting in the letter with that of Bill Drummond, the band's co-founder. The capital-letter style certainly looks similar. It's also worth bearing in mind that the KLF did indeed create a crop circle around the same time – a version of their pyramid-ghetto blaster logo. It featured in the video for "What Time Is Love?", a single that was released just five days after this incident on 30 July. Was the letter a promo for the new single? Did the KLF create the Blackbird circles? If not, how did they know to send the letter on the precise day the hoax happened? And why did they place the board games? Did they even send a letter at all?

Thirty years have passed since the incident, so I asked Colin Andrews what his thoughts about it are today.

"George Vernon (Merlin) and the KLF separately claimed involvement, but the fact that it was an obvious hoax once we entered the field meant we didn't investigate those claims further," Colin told me. "There was also some suspicion that the British Army might have had a hand in it. We had several soldiers there assisting and it was on MOD land. My own opinion is that it was Merlin, as a plug for his board game."

Eager to hear from Merlin himself, I dug through various Internet tunnels to track him down. He shared the source of the game's concept and design and what he believes happened on that mysterious night.

PETER LAWS: Did you fake the crop circles on the second night of Operation Blackbird?

MAGIC MERLIN: No. I did not create the circles!

PL: But you were there?

MM: Yes. I was in farmer Jonathan King's field that night. That's where I met an alien called Merlin. He came out of a

UFO. Colin Andrews's equipment picked it up. A figure with me with lights above, moving round.

PL: Why were you even in the field?

MM: Years before, around 1985/6, I went to Stonehenge. I used the stones to ask Merlin for help with marketing and producing my board game idea. He told me I'd be the chosen channel to produce the game. I then had 5,000 disc-boards printed. Merlin told me to be patient. He would choose a time for me to place the discs by ESP. He guided me to the field that night during Operation Blackbird.

PL: So how were the circles formed?

MM: I saw them appear in the field. I was then guided by Merlin to place six discs with six stones on each of the six circles.

PL: And were the KLF involved in any way?

MM: No. That was a complete lie by the group to seek publicity. Or they may have been part of the military cover-up. But nobody had the printed discs besides myself, at that point. They were stored in Bristol under lock and key. That's how I know they lied, because I was in the field with Merlin.

PL: How do you explain the uneven lines in the formation?

MM: Pat Delgado, the media or the MOD trashed them to look dishevelled.

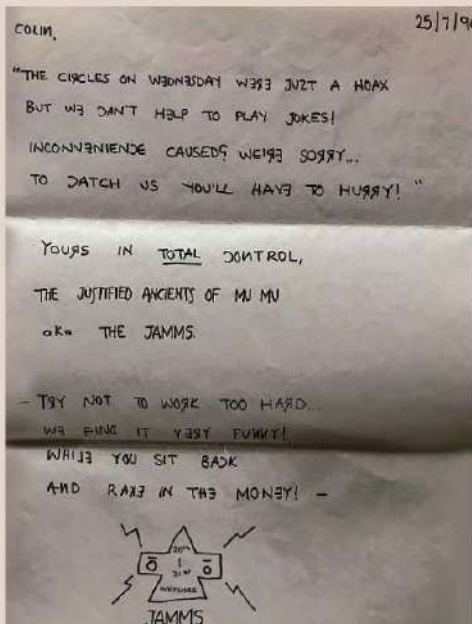
PL: Copies of your board game also came with instructions for a "Treasure Hunt". Players were encouraged to find hidden clues in the gamecards, crack the Merlin Riddle and discover a treasure in a particular part of England. Did anybody find the treasure?

MM: No, because I lost everything when I went to prison for something I never said.

PL: How was the game development financed?

MM: With £10,000. It appeared in my bank account overnight, by Merlin's mysticism. £10k to develop and market the game. The police arrested me for money laundering, but that was not so. They let me go after going to the bank to check it out. They couldn't find anything.

PL: Board games are usually designed for fun, but considering



TOP: Magic Merlin, aka George Vernon. ABOVE CENTRE: The game board found in a crop circle in July 1990. ABOVE: The letter sent to Colin Andrews.

its origin, would you say yours had a different purpose?

MM: My board game isn't a game. It's a higher level of communication that we need to learn. When someone plays the game, they slowly develop ESP.

PL: So, did the game achieve what you hoped for?

MM: The game will achieve its objective when Merlin returns.

PL: Do you still have any of the games today?

MM: All but one of the boxes, and the £10,000, were destroyed by the bastard council who emptied my flat after my arrest.

So, there are various theories about who created the circles that night. Was it the army diffusing the growing public interest in crop circles? The military were certainly involved in Operation Blackbird. Perhaps they had the skill to make the circles in total darkness, right under Colin Andrews's nose, and then placed the board games there to ensure it was seen as an obvious hoax. Or did the KLF create the formation to show their "total control" and promote their new single? Were the circles simply the work of George Vernon to promote his board game, or did an alien called Merlin really appear to George with gaming ideas and money for investment?

There's one more theory to add to the mix. It came from *Pebble Mill* reporter Debi Jones the following year. She was co-presenting a special crop circle edition of her BBC daytime show *People Today*, which featured Colin Andrews and Pat Delgado answering viewers' calls about Operation Blackbird. In a link to camera, Debi suggested the circles might have been simply caused by "hedgehogs on the march."

NOTE

Just as I was finishing this article, I received the following message from George Vernon: "Which came first? The chicken or the egg?... Which came first, the Crop Circle Game or the crop-circles? Answer: THE CROP CIRCLE GAME."

was thought he might survive. He was rushed to hospital, but on the way a bump in the road pushed one of his broken ribs and rammed it through his heart. The factory that the board had told him to build ended up taking his life.

The official William Fuld website says that as he lay on his deathbed “he made his children promise they would never sell the Ouija board.”¹⁰ The family company kept making boards for decades, until 1966 when they sold the business to Parker Brothers, who also made *Monopoly* and *Cluedo* at the time. Parker ads from the time echoed the 1920s approach, pitching the boards as fun (if mysterious) games, ideal for two players. One ad ran with the title “Funny How a Boy Seems to Make the Best Partner!” The picture shows a young, clean-cut couple consulting the board (knee-to-knee again), with floating questions asking: “Should we go steady?” and “What college will accept me?” The blurb adds: “Makes a great Christmas present for anyone who likes the fascinating experience of exploring the unknown.” Another Parker ad from 1970 picked up on the groovy occult scene that by then had slipped into American pop culture. This one has another dating couple, only they’re dressed in black and the ad promises that this “spooky talking board” will help a girl “relate to” her boyfriend. “Ouija’s Weird! Ouija’s Wonderful!” screams the ad, before ending with “You might even get a little turned on!” From Famous Parker Games.

The board went through a significant re-brand after 1973 when Ouija became viewed as less of a fun date night option and more a portal for a masturbating, vomit-demon. Movies, not board game companies, were to blame for the shift. It’s not that the Ouija hadn’t featured in horror before – it makes a spooky appearance in 1944’s *The Uninvited* – but *The Exorcist* was a punch to the cultural gut, igniting fears of religious abandonment, the rise of the occult and youth gone wild. And the doorway to this national loss of values and decline into societal chaos was a ‘harmless’ board game kept in the attics of America. The mother in the film doesn’t relate to this silly, childish game... but her daughter knows better and finds great meaning in it, which leads directly to her demonic possession. *The Exorcist* helped train a generation of parents and lawmakers to mistrust gaming in general; so, when the 1980s unleashed the dual threat of video games and Dungeons & Dragons, they were already predisposed to believe that Satan liked to roll dice.

The Ouija board never recovered from *The Exorcist*, but that wasn’t really a problem for Hasbro, who acquired Parker Brothers in 1991. With it, they got the Ouija patent, and rather than rehabilitate the board they embraced the horror of it all. In 2014 they even partnered with Universal to produce the hit horror-movie-cum-feature-length-ad *Ouija*. A prequel followed in 2016.

Hasbro have also released special editions, such as a green, glow-in-the-dark version in 1998 or their *Stranger Things Limited Edition*



THE EXORCIST HELPED TRAIN PARENTS AND LAW-MAKERS TO MISTRUST GAMING IN GENERAL

LEFT: From top to bottom: The marketing of the Ouija board often played on the romantic possibilities it offered, as in these two ads from the 1960s; the first, from 1968, shows clean cut teens asking “Should we go steady”, while just a year later, a 1969 ad plays up the weird aspects of the spooky board for groovy couples who “might just get turned on”; by 2010, the “Weed-Ja board was inviting stoners to “light up”.

in 2017. A Barbie-style pink edition for Toys R Us caused controversy for being pitched to young girls in 2010. British budget store chain Poundland got into similar hot water when they sold a large, folded ‘Spirit Board’ complete with the iconic Fuld Sun and Moon design. At £1, this was the cheapest board yet... but the store eventually pulled the product around Hallowe’en 2020 due to pressure from “church ministers and paranormal investigators”.¹¹ These people clearly subscribe to the Hasbro, rather than the Parker Brothers, school of Ouija.

The Ouija board has always straddled two worlds – a parlour game... and something more – but *The Exorcist* and the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 1990s helped cast it in a far darker light. I’ve met evangelical Christians who insist that the Ouija is a tool of Satan. I’ve also met ‘paranormal investigators’ who say the same thing – only they use words like “dark energy”. This element of threat and danger has, ironically, made the Ouija a go-to rite of passage for teenagers at parties, where the gamification of the supernatural creates a feeling that is hard to resist: high-stakes fun.

The Ouija now sits alongside dusty old copies of *Scrabble* or *Monopoly* in a surprising number of family attics and games cupboards. According to *Adweek*, there are an estimated 25 million Ouija boards in American homes today.¹² Yet many people simply make their own. That’s the beauty (some might say, the danger) of the Ouija board. You don’t even need a board to play it – just a glass and some letters and numbers. I’ve been at parties where people have used a torn-up cereal packet and a plastic deodorant top. It’s the same simplicity that first attracted Kennard and the other pioneers of ‘paranormal play’ well over a century ago. Yet the board has taken on an iconic status of its own, and so it remains desirable today, seen on everything from mouse mats and tattoos to tea towels and shower curtains.

Today, Hasbro lists the board on their website at \$19.99 under the title “Ouija Game for Ages 8 Years & Up, Some Adult Assembly Required”. Unlike Parker’s “fun-for-date-night” ad in 1966, Hasbro drop a hint of deliberate threat into their item description: “Handle the Ouija board *with respect* and it won’t disappoint you!”

OUIJA BOARD RIVALS

Eager to replicate the success of the Ouija, other companies have come up with their own versions of the ‘talking board’. Even Charles Kennard himself, who was so instrumental in

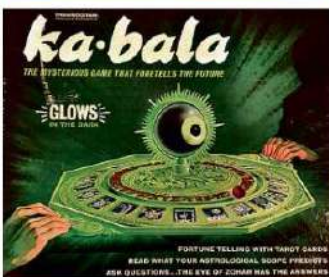
bringing the Ouija to the toy market, left his own novelty company in 1892 to set up a rival. The Volo board was its flagship product and could even predict the weather with options for “Clear” and “Rain”. Yet his old company, Kennard Novelty, quickly filed a Bill of Infringement. Kennard admitted defeat and the Volo ceased production in January 1892, a mere three months after Volo production had begun. Kennard tried again in 1897 when he set up the American Toy Company to produce the “Igli, Marvellous Talking Board”. The board (whose back was stamped with the words “Igli. Pat Applied For”) faded from sale in 1899. No record of a patent application has been found.¹³

The many variations on the Ouija board often come with evocative and exotic names. For example, “The Espirito or Revelator” (WS Reed Company, 1891) or “The Mitche Manitou Board” (Wilder Manufacturing Company, 1917). The “Nirvana Talking Board” (1907) stands out due to the Swastika printed at the top of the board. Casual observers might assume this was the go-to board for Nazi occultists (or, more likely for the time, Nazi couples on dates), but it dates from before Hitler’s repurposing of the symbol from its ancient religious roots. At the time this was simply a natural logo for the Swastika Novelty Company, which produced the Nirvana board for a brief period.

While the above boards had only minor stylistic difference to the Ouija board, more unusual innovations came to the novelty market too. Famous board game company Milton Bradley produced a unique talking board in 1895 called the “Genii (The Witch’s Fortune Teller)”.¹⁴ This version comes with a wooden top piece that slides to the side on wooden rollers. Letters can be viewed through the tiny viewing window in the lid. It was innovative for sure, but it never caught on. In 1943 the Psychic-Graf Company Inc produced the “Magi-Board”, which looked more like a printed bingo card, with a unique planchette system.¹⁵ Players would set their fingers on the tips of a wooden cross, with a spike pointed at the centre. Quite how this worked in practice is anybody’s guess, but the garish box art, complete with a guy in a turban holding a crystal ball, promised the Magi board would create “The Perfect Party” with “Marvelous Entertainment!” The following year, Alice Lee Manufacturing produced the “Star-Gazer Mystical Question Board Tray”. Not only did this Chinese-style novelty work as a “Mystical Question Board”, it also came with wooden handles to double as a serving tray.

One of the most fourteen talking boards is also the most toy-like. *Ka-Bala*, from 1967, is a highly stylised board made from moulded glow-in-the-dark plastic. In the centre sits a huge black eyeball (The Eye of Zohar!) watching over a circle of orange numbers and letters. As well as working like a talking board, this one also asks players to chant together at the start and use the included zodiac and tarot cards to enter the astral plane, all guided by the roll of a black marble.

For more talkative spirits, the board of choice would surely be the “Ziriya Human Bat-



ABOVE: From top to bottom: *The Star-Gazer Mystical Question Board* (Alice Lee Manufacturing, 1944); the *Ziriya Human Battery Talking Board* (Ziriya Creative Arts Group, 1972); *Ka-Bala* (Transogram, 1967).

tery Circuit Talking Board” from 1972, from the Ziriya Creative Arts Group. This garish bright yellow board doesn’t just offer letters, but a dartboard style circle bulging with hundreds of actual words (including, “tomorrow”, “engineer”, “sex”, “mistake”, “trip”, “affair” and “don’t”). Considering the period and far-out themes, it’s not a stretch to imagine a fair few people were stoned while using the Ziriya. But substance fans would get their bespoke board in 2010, when Icup Inc produced the “Weed-Ja, High Spirited Talking Board”. The green planchette is shaped like a cannabis leaf and the board has instructions to “light up” or “take one/two tokes”. Rather than “yes, no, hello and goodbye” the Weed-Ja offers “yeah, man; no way; hey man and later, dude.”

NOTES

- 1 www.popularmechanics.com/culture/g25347292/10-retro-sci-fi-board-games/
- 2 <http://ufoseries.com/miscCollectibles/>
- 3 www.fishpond.co.uk/Toys/UFORIA-Explore-UFOPhenomena-Board-Game-1989-Steve-Falcone-Steve-Falcone/9999117843378
- 4 <http://pennyplays.co.uk/vintage-games/expedition-to-the-himalayas/>
- 5 Watch a vintage ad at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYMHdKa01I
- 6 Dynamic Design Games had a knack for unusual board games with serious themes. *Blacks & Whites*, from 1970, was a Monopoly-style real estate game where players are divided into the white race (who start with £1 million to spend and the ability to buy property anywhere) and black race (who have \$10k and are restricted and penalised at every turn). “Your challenge: To keep the land-hungry majority type from winning the game cheaply and quickly... If black players turn the tide against white advantages, a kind of irrepressible excitement takes over the board.”
- 7 *The Sunday Herald* article (21 Dec 1890) suggests that the Ouija had been granted a patent at that point, but other records say it was granted on 10 Feb 1891. Perhaps the ‘test’ of the board happened in late 1890 but the patent was officially granted the following February.
- 8 www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-strange-and-mysterious-history-of-the-ouija-board-5860627/
- 9 www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2012/02/ouija/
- 10 www.williamfuld.com/biography.html
- 11 www.mirror.co.uk/money/poundland-pulls-satanic-ouija-boards-2286593
- 12 www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/why-are-ouija-boards-still-so-damn-creepy/
- 13 www.oldest.org/culture/ouija-boards/
- 14 www.sfromuseum.org/exhibitions/mysterious-talking-board-ouija-and-beyond/detail#3
- 15 www.messynessychic.com/2016/03/29/all-the-different-ouija-board-you-never-knew-existed/. Visit www.museumoftalkingboards.com/ for a comprehensive survey of the Ouija and its rivals.

For more on the Ouija, see also **FT249:30-37, 269:48-49, 318:14-15**.

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THE STOMACH RULES THE WORLD!

In an extract from his new book on the human body, **FRANK GONZALEZ-CRUSSI** pays tribute to His Digestive Majesty and explores the history of eccentric and excessive eating.

Great Britain has contributed countless cultural, scientific and technological benefits to the world. But the British contribution includes also a contingent, probably larger than that of any other country, of unconventional, original individuals, the notorious English “eccentrics.” Most germane to the present discussion is the Reverend Dr William Buckland (1784-1856), Dean of Christ Church, eminent geologist, and “zoophage” extraordinaire. It has been said that his cherished ambition was to carve himself a pathway through life with knife and fork, eating every living animal in existence. He prized himself on being the *man who ate everything*.

Buckland excavated one of the oldest human remains ever found, and was the first person to teach geology at Oxford University. As a lecturer he was immensely popular: his diction was clear, his delivery lively, and he moved around holding specimens, telling jokes, and imitating the gait of extinct animals. The following anecdote, told by one of his students, attests to the fact that Buckland earned a prominent place in geology and paleontology, as well as in gastronomy and the history of the stomach.

He paced like a Franciscan preacher up and down. . . He had in his hand a huge hyena's skull. He suddenly dashed down the steps – rushed skull in hand at the first undergraduate on the front bench and shouted “What rules the world?” The youth, terrified, answered not a word. He rushed then on to me, pointing the hyena full in my face – “What rules the world?”

“Haven’t an idea,” I said. “The stomach, sir!” he cried “rules the world. The great ones eat the less, the less the lesser still!”¹

At his soirées, guests were likely to savour such delicacies as boiled hedgehogs, mice on toast, crocodile steaks, roast ostrich, porpoise, panther, or cooked puppies. Once, our man was visiting a cathedral and was shown some stains on the floor. The priest told him that according to a venerable old tradition, the spots had been caused by the spilled blood of a saint who had been martyred right there. The omnivorous – or perhaps best termed “omniphagous” – paleontologist went down on his hands and knees, licked the flagstones, and solemnly declared: “This is not blood. I can tell you with absolute assurance, this is bat’s urine!” Upon



TOP: The Reverend Dr William Buckland, the man who ate everything. ABOVE: Frank Buckland, who inherited his father’s zoophagous tendencies.

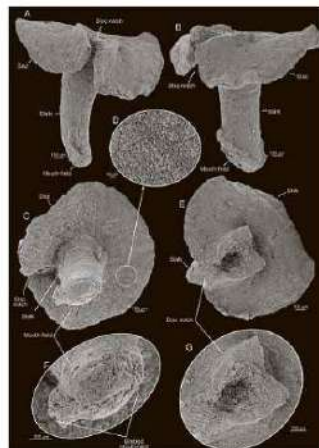
the incontrovertible evidence furnished by his tongue’s gustatory papillae, Dr Buckland had definitively disproved (albeit by a method not easily reproducible) an ancient myth.

Dr Buckland’s son, Francis Trevelyan, better known as Frank (1826–1880), inherited his father’s voracious and bizarre tendencies. It has been said that to father and son, “Noah’s Ark looked like a dinner menu.” Frank Buckland studied medicine and became a surgeon, but soon his interest in natural history took him away from surgical practice. Nor did he forsake his father’s bequest, the leanings toward eccentricity.² As a child, he rode the corpses of dead crocodiles which his father gave the children of the family, instead of hobbyhorses, to play with. Early on, he kept a menagerie of his own. His best-known pet was a bear cub, whom he dressed in the ceremonial cap and gown of Christ Church at Oxford. Guests at his London home were served porpoise head, boiled elephant trunk, roasted giraffe neck, mice in batter, squirrel pie, horse’s tongue, and other like delicacies. A biographer wrote that “his research consisted in eating the animal kingdom.” This interesting field of investigation Frank Buckland called “zoophagy.”

HIS DIGESTIVE MAJESTY

Buckland the Elder was right: the stomach rules the world. It comprises a mighty, universal force that is found ensconced in the abdomen of all animals. The great Paracelsus (1493–1541; see FT157:30-34), physician, alchemist, heterodox preacher, and precursor of medical chemistry, thought that a “vital principle” dwells in us. This he saw as a force that links man, nature, and the Universe, and is responsible for the reactions that take place within living bodies; in sum, a force necessary for the very continuation of life. This ineffable vital force he called the *archeus*. And where did he place it? Not inside the precious brain, as might have been intuitive for the many who consider the cerebrum the supreme ruler of the organism; nor in the heart, despite its enormous prestige as the preternatural pump that drives the vivifying sap to every recess of the body; but, of all places, in the stomach.

On a grand biological scale, scarcely can we think of an organ more important than the stomach. Forget the brain or the heart; as to the former, experience persuades us that the



LEFT: The stomach in a 19th century watercolour.
ABOVE: The mushroom-shaped marine animal named *Dendrogramma*, discovered by Danish marine scientists in 1986.

minimal amount of grey substance compatible with life is truly minuscule: in this regard, the British writer Roger Lewin published in 1980 an article in the prestigious *Science* magazine, with the colourful title “Is Your Brain Really Necessary?”³ Lewin, reviewing the work of the paediatrician John Lorber, showed that patients who had suffered massive losses of brain substance due to hydrocephalus displayed no symptoms and led normal lives. A case in point was that of a young man in whom the brain had been reduced to a thin, barely discernible film, the rest having been replaced by fluid. Still, the patient had obtained a mathematics degree at the University of Sheffield, and had a high IQ.⁴ The least that can be said about these findings is that they challenge traditional views of the role of the brain in cognition and memory.

Our partiality for the heart is equally ill-founded, since throughout nature innumerable species – such as nematodes and sea anemones – don’t seem to miss the presence of the much-vaunted pumping organ. In lower organisms, nutritive fluids are distributed through the tissues by passive diffusion, or propelled by bodily movements, as in worms. But a stomach is a different matter. However high you climb, and however low you descend, in the zoological evolutionary scale, you will always find a digestive cavity that it is not inappropriate to call “stomach”. From microscopic to gigantic living beings, from amoebas to killer whales, none will be found to lack a stomach. Naturalists of the past pointed out that some animals seem to be reduced to a gastric receptacle and little else.

In the mysterious *Dendrogramma enigmatica* – which seems to have been in existence some 600 million years ago – there is no such thing

SCARCELY CAN WE THINK OF AN ORGAN MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE STOMACH

as a heart, and no trace of a nervous system. But it surely has a digestive system, which the scientists call “gastrovascular” because digestion takes place inside this tubular space, whose motions help to distribute the tissue fluids. Hence it is not far-fetched to say that it had a primitive stomach. Now, since the most primitive forms of life are so provided, it was logical to conclude that a gastric pouch must have been the earliest organ to develop; hence we may say this organ was the most basic, the most elemental for organised life, and therefore the most important. We must all bow to His Digestive Majesty.

ANTIQUE FEASTS AND FOLLIES

Unfortunately, every time a faculty of the human body is deemed admirable, someone will try to abuse it, or to test it to the extreme. The digestive power of the stomach was no exception. In every age, men were found who endeavoured to transgress the natural boundaries of the gastric function. Some eccentrics, as we have seen, aspired to digest everything.

Classical antiquity offers stupendous examples of this human folly. In terms of eating immoderately, the Romans stand alone. The same impetus that built the mighty empire seems to have burst forth at meal time. Their princes

gave memorable banquets that seem fictional by virtue of their sheer extravagance. Sea-food was brought inland at enormous cost, from as far away as Gibraltar, so that the emperor could taste his favourite kind of fish; and it was to be served in blue-coloured seasonings, presumably the only colour appropriate to ocean fare. Among the exotic delicacies consumed, historical records list brains of peacocks and pheasants, tongues of flamingos combined with lamprey’s milt, camels’ heels, and other highly vaunted tidbits. The Roman *Ælius Verus* invented a famous dish, the “pentapharmacum,” composed of sow’s udders, plus the meat of pheasants, peacocks, wild boar, and ham.

Historians speak of Roman dinners costing millions of sesterces, not only because of the enormous difficulty in procuring the rare ingredients of meals, but also due to the squandering inherent to the banquets’ preparation. Ground pearls were sprinkled on rice, like pepper. The tableware was made of costly, precious metals. Numerous slaves were at hand in expensive raiment. Gifts were offered by the host to his guests, and they could carry their presents home when the dinner was over. Such gifts, called *apophoreta*, consisted of food, pins, vases, etc. Gifts of this kind were especially common during the feasts of the Saturnalia (see p55).⁵ It has been calculated that Emperor Vitellus spent about £3,200 at each repast. The archaeologist Deborah Ruscillo painstakingly calculated the cost of a 15-guest dinner in imperial Rome. She converted the ancient Roman silver coins (*denarii*) into gold pieces (*aurei*), then converted these into American dollars, based on the price of gold.⁶ The price of the banquet came to about \$10,000 in today’s market, not including “extras” like garnishes, perfumes, gifts, and slave services.

Little wonder that Augustus (ruled 27 BC

to AD 14) saw the need to issue strict laws against extravagant menus and spendentious excess in banquets. Such ordinances were eminently prudent, and aimed to preserve the health of the people; but gluttony prevailed, and the wealthy and powerful were the first to transgress the restrictions. Emperor Claudius entertained no fewer than 600 guests at his table. Aspius, a member of the Roman elite, wrote abundantly on cuisine, and left more than 500 recipes, many with the most unusual ingredients.

A celebrated dish deserves separate mention. It was introduced to Roman society by a patrician of noble lineage, Servilius Rullus, who named it “wild boar in the Trojan style,” or, as today’s gourmets might snobbishly say, using French terminology, boar “à la troyenne.” This dish was remarkable not only for its colossal size, but also for its imaginative and laborious confection. It was first offered at a banquet to honour Cicero. Four Ethiopian slaves entered the banquet hall, carrying on their shoulders a huge silver tray on which rested a roasted whole boar of impressive dimensions. Little baskets of figs hung from its tusks. This big beast was surrounded by little pastries in the shape of baby boars, artistically disposed and adorned. Amid the guests’ joyous expectation, the cook appeared: a Sicilian, and the true creator of this dish. With great dexterity he carved the animal, to reveal a second boar inside it, and upon cutting this one, still a third; and there followed a series of delicacies of progressively diminishing size, one inside the other, like “Russian dolls.” Hence the name “Trojan style” in reminiscence of the Greek soldiers who, according to tradition, hid inside a huge wooden horse during the siege of Troy. At the end of the series, a small bird – a beccafico, or



fig-pecker, delicately cooked – was found. “It must be confessed,” says a historian, “that such magnificence rather resembles folly.”

The strange collection of narratives on ancient gastronomy by Athenæus of Naucratis (flourished at the end of the second and beginning of the third century AD), called *The Deipnosophists* or *Banquet of the Learned*, is considered by scholars a rich mine of information about many ancient social customs, but particularly the culinary and eating habits of classical Græco-Roman antiquity. In this work we read that Mithridates, king of Pontus,⁷ once proposed a great eating and drinking competition, with a talent of silver as main prize. We are informed that a Persian man named Cantibaris gave proof of unprecedented gluttony at one of those extraordinary eating gatherings. When he felt exhausted by the effort of continuous mastication, he asked his slaves to pour the food into his mouth, which he kept wide open while he remained passive and semi-recumbent, so that it was as

if the slaves were pouring the food into an empty vessel. Unbelievable as it sounds, this extraordinary method of self-cramming is not impossible. Physiology studies have shown that some people are able to relax the musculature of the œsophagus, which becomes easily distensible. This is probably the mechanism operative in sword-swallowers and other entertainers whose “performance” includes the swallowing of large solid objects.

Whereas the incident just referred to may have some shadow of verisimilitude, other accounts are so outlandish as to impress us as obviously legendary. Such is the story of Cambles, an episode which, according to Athenæus, was written in the fifth century BC by the Greek historian and logographer Xanthus in his book *Lydiaca* that is now lost and known only by fragmentary allusions from other writers. In this story, Cambles, King of the Lydians, is depicted as a voracious eater and immoderate drinker. He was probably intoxicated after one of his usual binges when, having lost all measure of discernment and self-control, he killed his own wife, cut her up into edible pieces, and proceeded to eat her! When he came to his senses, he realised what he had done upon discovering a piece of his wife’s hand in his mouth.

COMPETITIVE EATING

The eating competitions that we read about in Athenæus’s *Banquet of the Learned* pale in comparison with the events that are held in our day.

Foremost among these is undoubtedly the American hot dog ingestion contest celebrated in the United States at Coney Island on the Fourth of July. The Græco-Roman contests took place in the palatial halls of some sybaritic satrap, and among his dissolute cronies. Today’s American eating tournament is attended by over 40,000 people, and close to three million spectators watch it live on television. The festival opens with speeches by the mayor of New York and other notables.

The company that sponsors the event, Nathan’s Famous, a chain of hot dog restaurants, receives a great amount of publicity. The participants, among whom are the champions who may win a \$10,000 prize, enjoy the celebrity status of heroes, just like outstanding sports athletes. Nor is this an idle comparison, for eating has been elevated to the rank of a true sport. Like soccer, it now has a federation, the “Major League Eating” (MLE),⁸ in charge of regulating all professional eating contests; and, through its parent organisation, the IFOCE (International Federation of Competitive Eating), the ranking of the competitors, and the remunerations granted. There are 90 different kinds of competitions throughout the country; not all are related to hot dogs. A chicken wing competition is held in Buffalo, New York; waffle eating, in Atlanta; hamburger eating, in Chattanooga; among other foods featured in various competitions are pies, pizzas, ribs, oysters, boiled eggs, sushi, ice cream, and so on.



ABOVE: *A Roman Feast*, a late 19th century painting by popular Italian artist Roberto Bompiani. TOP: One of the most extravagant dishes described by Roman writers – wild boar in the Trojan style.



ABOVE LEFT: Sonya Thomas, alias the Black Widow (second from left) and Takeru Kobayashi (third from left) were among the competitors in the annual 4 July International Hot Dog Eating Contest at Coney Island July 4, 2005. ABOVE RIGHT: The 2013 champion, Joey "Jaws" Chestnut put away 69 hot dogs in 10 minutes.

The contestants are professional "eaters" who sign autographs and may become "legends" to aficionados. Clearly, the "eaters" have moved from carnival freak shows to the mainstream of "entertainment": some make a substantial amount of money going from contest to contest. Take Takeru Kobayashi, a scarcely 60kg (132.2 lb), 1.73m (5ft6in) young Japanese male who one day appeared at the competition and pulverised the world record of 25 hot dogs in 12 minutes, by consuming in that time... 50! Incredible as it seems, he nearly doubled the previous record. The new champion kept his throne for six years, only to be vanquished in 2013 by the challenger, a 32-year-old American, Joey "Jaws" Chestnut, who was able to pack away 69 hot dogs in the allotted time of 10 minutes.

Competitors are the first to avow that they do not think of their activity as "eating," at least not in the traditional sense. We generally associate eating with two basic, subverting ideas, namely, the satisfaction of the need for nutriment, and the bodily pleasure that accompanies the accomplishment of this satisfaction. In speed-eating, food is no longer nutriment, and it ceases to be an agent of pleasure. It becomes a hurdle to surpass, an obstacle to overcome at any cost. The champions speak of their endeavour as a test of drive and dedication. In order to become equal to the challenge, they must train. "Training" means subjecting themselves to grueling and dangerous routines. For instance, they drink several gallons of water daily, or eat an equivalent volume of solid food. The possibility of an accident – a tear in the gastric wall in consequence of excessive stretching, or sudden impaction of solid food in the larynx, producing asphyxiation – is ever present. They must proceed with extreme care and under supervision. The goal is to transform the stomach from a muscular viscus to a flaccid pouch

that can accommodate a vast amount of food without eliciting the sensation of satiety.

Very few medical studies have been done on professional speed-eaters, but from what scanty information has been obtained, it can be seen that a stomach changed into a loose, atonic bag may be the source of grave ills. A stomach whose muscular walls have become weak and quaggy has trouble propelling the digested food bolus downstream, into the first part of the small intestine. The stomach's flabbiness may progress to nearly complete paralysis (gastroparesis), for which no medical remedy is now extant; it may become necessary to surgically remove the organ, totally or in part.

Eating competitions have been thought of as a conscious ballyhoo of the wealth and prosperity of the United States. For although chomping-and-gulping encounters have been staged in Hong Kong, Australia, Canada, and other countries, they remain quintessentially American – a flamboyant, unabashed display of overabundance. Psychologists have suggested that participants are drawn to the competitions under varied motivations, such as exhibitionism, an affirmation of virility, or the desire for approval and recognition.

The stomach rules the world. But this "king of the bodily economy", as French physician François-Joseph-Victor Broussais (1772–1838) called it, has a less dependable prime minister, the brain. We are generally told that to depend on this organ's counsel is wise. Unfortunately, the brain is not always well balanced and precisely calibrated; often, its designs seem to originate more from rashness and caprice than reason or common sense. It is the unbalanced brain, not the stomach, which misleads men and women into the aberrance of overindulgence, the depravity of gourmandising, and the freakishness of speed-eating competitions.

NOTES

1 Quoted by Fraser Lewry, "The Man Who Ate Everything," *Guardian*, published online 25 Feb 2008, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordformouth/2008/feb/25/foodherowilliam-buckland.

2 See Richard Girling, *The Man Who Ate the Zoo: Frank Buckland, Forgotten Hero of Natural History* (Chatto & Windus, 2016).

3 Roger Lewin, "Is Your Brain Really Necessary?", *Science* 210 (12 Dec 1980): pp1232–1234.

4 Lionel Feuillel et al., "Brain of a White-Collar Worker," *Lancet* 370, no. 9583 (July 2007): 262.

5 "Apophoreta" entry in Anthony Rich, *A Dictionary of Roman and Greek Antiquities*, 5th ed. (Longmans, Green & Co., 1890), p44.

6 Deborah Ruschillo, "When Gluttony Ruled!", *Archeology* 54, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2001): pp20–25.

7 Most likely Mithridates VI (reigned 120–63 BC), who engaged the Romans in repeated wars. It is famously recounted that he became immune to many poisons by early exposure to the same over a long time period.

8 See its website: www.majorleagueeating.com/. The MLE was established in 1997.



This is an abridged extract from *The Body Fantastic* by Frank Gonzalez-Crussi, The MIT Press, 2021, £25. ISBN: 9780262045889

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THE WANDERING STONES OF STREATLEY

In lockdown, with travel restricted, pubs shut and socialising banned, LISA GLEDHILL decided to try to crack a local mystery – where exactly are all the Streatley Sarsen Stones?



LISA GLEDHILL

Streatley village lies where the Ridgeway meets the Thames. The river spreads wide across the valley bottom and a series of small islands make it the ideal spot for fording or bridging the water. It's been a crossing-point and meeting place for millennia. Today, two large sarsen stones stand either side of the road bridge, just at the point where it springs off the Berkshire bank on its journey to Oxfordshire.

Sarsens are sandstone boulders left by glacial action and they look nothing like the underlying chalky bedrock. They're common in Wiltshire and parts of the Berkshire ridgeway but rarer in this area, so the pair by the bridge and a handful of others positioned at key points around the village

IF THE BIG ROCKS ON MY HOME TURF ARE GOING WALKABOUT I WANT TO KNOW ABOUT IT

really stand out.

Inevitably, there's a legend about how these funny old rocks came to be here. It's all the fault of the Aldworth Giants – a group of larger than life-size stone effigies of the De la Beche family who lie in

St Mary's parish church, two and a half miles away.¹ Four of the warrior-giants are known as John Long, John Strong, John Never-Afraid and John Ever-Afraid, who sold his soul to the Devil.² One day, so the story goes, the giants had a rock-throwing competition and the sarsen stones scattered around the district are the result of their sport. One stone even bears the imprint of a giant hand.

The myth is understandably vague about the number of stones and exactly where they are, but, surprisingly, even the more serious local histories can't agree. Stones are mentioned by some writers but not others, stones that are said to have been destroyed turn up again later, and the stones that are most obvious today aren't mentioned by

early writers at all. It's quite weird that no one can agree on the location of some pretty big objects in such a heavily populated area. It's almost as if they are moving around when no one is looking.

If so, it wouldn't be the first set of stones with a reputation for wandering. Lots of megaliths, notably those at Stanton Drew in Somerset, are reputed to go for a stroll at midnight on special nights.³ Many stone groups are also said to be impossible to count – the Rollright stones, about 45 miles (72km) away from Streatley, are famously innumerable – and if anyone tries it and comes up with the same number three times, they'll either be blessed or cursed depending on which version of the myth you believe.⁴

SARSEN HUNTING

I love a puzzle and if the big rocks on my home turf are going walkabout I want to know about it. So with time on my hands during lockdown, and undeterred by potential curses, I decided to try and track down all the Streatley sarsens and work out why (assuming they weren't thrown by giants) they came to be in their present positions.

The earliest reference to the stones crops up in a book by antiquarian Thomas Hearn from 1716. He mentions two large boulders, which he believed to be Roman milestones marking the route of the ancient Icknield Way between Aldworth and Streatley. "I have plainly discovered two of the Mercuriall or Mile Stones, fix'd a great many yards in the ground, that are now to be seen between Stretely and Aldworth, one of which lyes a mile from Stretely. These stones are much admir'd by the country people, who think that they could be fix'd there by none but such heroical persons (which they call giants) as lye in Aldworth church."⁵

Typical Roman milestones are made from dressed stone and inscribed with useful information, but the Streatley stones are rugged and unmarked. However, there's no reason the practical Romans couldn't have adopted pre-existing waymarkers to help find their way to the river-crossing. Later antiquarians seem to have accepted the Roman explanation at face value.

Unfortunately, Hearn's milestone near Aldworth is now missing. A 1901 report by Professor TR Jones says it was broken up for roadstone "not so many years ago."⁶ Along the roadside, in the area described by Jones, I found a line of football-sized rocks separating the tarmac from the grass verge. Most were local flints, but five or six of them were sarsens. Might this be all that's left of the megalith? It's curious that neither Hearn nor Jones mention any of the sarsens visible in Aldworth village today, including one in the churchyard itself (presumably the result of a giant missing his throw). The village boulders are all small to medium-sized, which suggests the documented stones were something much more impressive.

The second milestone was said to be in a field near Kiddington Farm, and modern OS



ABOVE: The two Kiddington Farm sarsen stones – the bottom one shows the giant's handprint. FACING PAGE: One of the Aldworth giants – in fact, effigies of the De la Beche family – at rest in St Mary's Church.

maps show an area called "Stonefield Shaw" which must be a clue to its original location. However, an 1844 report by historian William Hewett describes this Roman "Millaria" being dragged about a quarter of a mile to a more convenient spot by the roadside.⁷ Hewett says this is the stone marked by the giant's handprint. Apparently, it took a team of eight horses, which, if true, suggests the stone must have been huge – at least the size of the biggest sarsens at Avebury. However, the reference to eight horses sounds suspiciously folkloric. Magical rocks or bells or crosses are often said to take far more force to shift than their size would suggest.⁸

Professor Jones says this stone was taken away by a man from Wallingford to use as a garden ornament, but 101 years later a group from a local history society found what they believe to be the same stone, almost completely overgrown, in the roadside verge.⁹ When I went to check on it, I was surprised to find not one but two stones, about 10m (33ft) apart. Did it break into two (or more) pieces when it was moved?

Or could the stones be multiplying? People living nearby confirmed the two stones had been there since at least the 1930s (which was as far back as anyone could remember.) One of the lumpy boulders does have a hollow that could look a bit like a giant handprint, if you squint.

In 1987 the biggest of the stones near the bridge came close to being destroyed by workmen altering the driveway of the nearby Swan Hotel. Local amateur historians John and Margaret Westwood managed to halt the work and persuaded the hotel manager to save the stone. This was possibly a lucky escape for the workmen because plenty of similar brooding monoliths, for example the Humber Stone near Leicester, are said to inflict terrible punishments on those who damage or disturb them.¹⁰ Today, the big stone rests in a flowerbed at the hotel entrance, with a plaque describing it as a prehistoric route-marker, repurposed in the Middle Ages as a county boundary stone. A similar sarsen sits on the opposite side of the road at the entrance to a private house.



ABOVE: The large sarsen stone at the Swan Hotel. BELOW LEFT: Sarsen at the crossroads opposite The Bull Inn. BELOW RIGHT: Sarsen stone outside private house opposite The Swan hotel.

At the crossroads in the middle of Streatley, two sarsen boulders poke their heads about a foot above the tarmac. It's impossible to say how deep they go, and they might once have been much taller. One is wedged hard against the corner of an 18th century house and the other, split into three chunks, stands outside the 15th century Bull Inn. It's tempting to think they are ancient route-markers but possibly they were put there to stop the buildings being hit by vehicles. They've certainly taken a few hard knocks in recent years, which might be why they seem so short.

A MISSING STONE

That leaves just one more documented stone to find – and it's the most mysterious of the lot. Several sources mention a sarsen in the earth bank outside St Mary's church in Streatley,¹¹ a 13th century building, possibly on a Saxon foundation. It's not unheard of for churches (notably at Rudston in Yorkshire) to be built near standing stones – the problem is that there's no stone there today. The Churchwarden, who's been in post for at least 10 years, doesn't know where the stone is, and the woman who's lived directly opposite the church for "a long time" has never heard of it. Yet when I checked with the author of the 2002 local history society report, he was surprised it had disappeared. So what happened to it?

The links with important landmarks like crossroads, bridges and churches suggests some significance in the arrangement of the Streatley Sarsens, but it's hard to make out a pattern. It would be nice to imagine



they are the remains of an ancient avenue like the magnificent processional ways at Avebury, but there are too few of them and the ground is too disrupted by later human occupation for there to be any evidence of that. Could they have some astronomical significance, like the sarsens at Stonehenge and many other megalithic monuments? Well I'm no astronomy expert, but I checked for some of the more obvi-



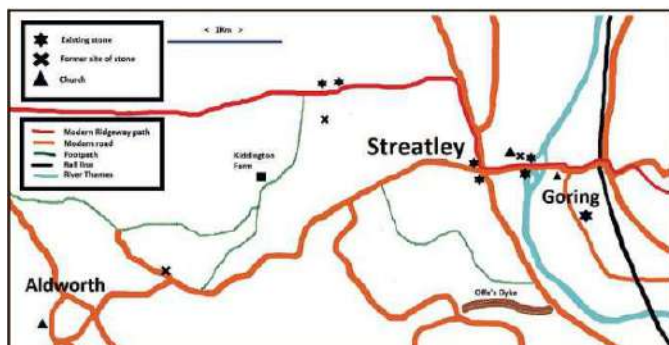
ous seasonal alignments and couldn't find anything.

A Roman origin seems unlikely, but the prehistoric route-marker explanation favoured by John and Margaret Westwood is worth investigating. Sadly, the Westwoods are no longer with us and I can't trace the sources for their theory, but I find the evidence in the landscape to be persuasive. The Thames valley in this area floods most



LISA GLEDHILL

ABOVE: Sarsen stones outside The Bull Inn in Streatley. BELOW: A map showing the location of existing and former sites of the Streatley sarsen stones.



winters and before modern rigid embankments it must have often been boggy even in summer. It would certainly be helpful to mark a safe route to the best crossing point with something that wouldn't wash away. Looking at the modern OS map, it's notable that most of the stones line up along the modern Ridgeway path – or what might have been the Ridgeway path before post-medieval field enclosures.

The main problem with this idea is that there doesn't seem to be a comparable alignment of stones at key points on the opposite side of the river. There's nothing beside the Oxfordshire end of the bridge or at the nearby church or crossroads. The one or two sarsens still visible are on minor lanes or in private gardens. However, we don't know how many stones might have been moved or lost during riverside development and we can be pretty sure that the ancient

road layout was different from the modern layout, which has been shaped by the route of the Great Western Railway.

Personally, I think it's very likely that the distinctive sarsen stones were used to indicate the route from the high downs to the crossing – but how long ago this first occurred, and how many times the rocks have been rearranged since then is a mystery. Clearly my little lockdown adventure has raised as many questions as it's answered, but it has demonstrated an important principle. Whatever you're researching, even if it's something that appears to be big and obvious and well-attested by recent writers, you really do need to check the first-hand evidence for yourself.

❖ LISA GLEDHILL is a full-time film-maker, regular contributor to *Fortean Times* and frequent ancient stone-botherer.

NOTES

- 1 The present church dates back to the 12th century but a yew in the churchyard has been variously estimated to be between one and two thousand years old.
- 2 Legend says John Ever-Afraid was doomed whether he was buried within the church or without, but he thwarted the Devil by being buried inside the church wall.
- 3 According to English Heritage, quoting John Aubrey, midnight on the sixth day after a full moon is the date favoured by the Stanton Drew stones. www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stanton-drew-circles-and-cove/history/
- 4 www.megalithic.co.uk. See entry for the Rollright Stones.
- 5 Hearn's edition of Roper's *The Life of Sir Thomas More*, 1716, p247.
- 6 Professor Thomas Rupert Jones, "History of the Sarsens, *Geological Magazine New Series*, Decade IV, Vol III, No 1, Jan 1901.
- 7 William Hewett, *The History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Compton*, 1844, p152.
- 8 Folklorists Jennifer Westwood and Dr Jacqueline Simpson list a resistance to being moved as one of a set of standard traditions attached to many megalithic monuments, along with uncountability, curses, petrification of wrongdoers and moving independently. *The Lore of the Land*, 2005 p596.
- 9 "'Roman Milestones' Near Streatley?" by Edward Golton, *South Oxfordshire Archaeological Group Bulletin* No 57, 2002.
- 10 www.fairyst.com/fairy-places/midland-fairies/the-humber-stone-leicester/
- 11 The most recent written references I've found are in the 2002 SOAG report listed above, and on the plaque fastened to the side of the stone at the Swan hotel.



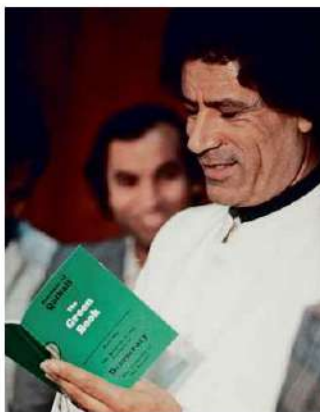
GREEN INK

SD TUCKER analyses Colonel Gaddafi's many inept writings and reveals a strange plan to turn Libya's deserts Green

Like so many dictators, Colonel Gaddafi (see FT412:50-53) was a compulsive scribbler of deviant and aberrant tracts whose content only revealed his obvious state of profound mental illness. Muammar's own chief literary folly was *The Green Book*, Libya's version of Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, extracts from which were broadcast daily on TV and radio, daubed across buildings, billboards and bridges and studied in schools. Front-doors were painted bright green in tribute to its wisdom – either that or Shakin' Stevens was big in Tripoli. Creditably, the dictator's text defended freedom of speech. Every human being “as an individual, should have the freedom of expression and, even if mad, should have the right to freely express his/her madness,” wrote Gaddafi, sounding like RD Laing.

The first volumes of 1976/78 were standard socialist dogma with an Arab nationalist bent. Gaddafi argued Western ‘representative democracy’ was a huge con in which elites told plebs to choose between two teams of identikit candidates offering virtually the same policies, none of which were what voters actually wanted. “Representation is Fraud” was his slogan. In Green Libya, the citizenry became divided into ‘People's Congresses’, giant Bedouin tent-like structures in which each area's ordinary Abduls would feed their desires up the chain towards Gaddafi, who would supposedly then act accordingly; but anyone foolishly speaking out against the ‘people's will’ in such tribal councils was denounced by spies, thus making this form of representation a fraud too. Private business should be given to the workers and rented properties handed over to tenants to live in for free, the tent-people decreed – policies of “People's Capture” that proved popular until seized supermarkets ran low on food as shelf-stackers had no idea how to navigate the import market. Yet oil cash staved off disaster, with Libya renamed ‘The Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya’ (‘State of the Masses’). Literacy-rates, healthcare and infrastructure did improve, if thanks only to hated foreign petro-dollars; GDP per capita soared from \$40 in 1951 to over \$8,000 in 1979. Money itself was still slated to vanish from the land in the end, though; which in a sense it did, as from 1980 anyone with over 1,000 dinar in the bank had it stolen, thus making the apparently impressive increase in average wealth moot.

Gaddafi's Green ideology was truly rooted in his humble desert youth rather than in



“GET US BETTER TELEPHONE SERVICE! BUY A CAT FOR US!”

standard Marxist dialectic. The Qadhafiyya clan – the name means “to spit or vomit” – were penniless Bedouins, Muammar's father an illiterate camel-herder. He didn't even have a birth-certificate. As a schoolboy, Gaddafi already aspired to enter politics, idolising Egypt's military strongman Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Arab nationalist who delivered the final death blow to the British Empire during 1956's Suez Crisis. Gaddafi impersonated Nasser's fiery speeches to classmates, whom he persuaded to join the army with him to help take over the country and kick out any remaining former Italian and British occupiers. In 1969 he overthrew King Idris in a military coup, meeting his idol Colonel Nasser, whose own rank he now copied. Nasser called Gaddafi “a nice boy, but terribly naive”; which was at least half-right. Egypt's next leader Anwar Sadat disagreed, thinking him “100 per cent sick”, and as the pan-Arab alliance fell apart, Gaddafi retreated from Tripoli back into the desert to meditate. This may explain why 1979's final volume of *The Green Book* was rather stranger than the first two, and full of profound

LEFT: Colonel Gaddafi enjoying the 1984 edition of *The Green Book*. FACING PAGE: A smouldering copy of Gaddafi's magnum opus, burned by residents of the Libyan town of Benghazi on 2 March 2011.

insights like “A living creature is a being who inevitably lives until it is dead” and “It is an undisputed fact that both man and woman are human beings.”

The 100 per cent sick Gaddafi was 50 per cent an economic Marxist but 100 per cent not a cultural one, embracing traditional Islamic tribal ways. Allowing ethnic or religious minorities to flourish was pure idiocy, and against the laws of physics: the nation was the tribe writ large, just as the tribe was the family writ large. Ethno-nationalism was as natural as the family unit, and diversity inevitably destroyed it, nativist prejudices being “like gravity in the domain of material and celestial bodies; if the Sun lost its gravity, its gases would explode and its unity would no longer exist” – hence Libya's expulsion of Jews, Italians, Brits, etc. It was better for illiterate tribesmen to educate their kids in the ways of camels than to send them to school, as such places just filled their heads with pointy-headed nonsense (Gaddafi once proposed a ban on schools, but found his plans blocked). Any country based on anything other than the age-old ways of its people was doomed to die like today's rootless West, whose degeneracy was embodied by its attitude towards sport, which was now a media spectacle, not a vehicle for personal participation. “It is unlikely crowds will enter a restaurant just to look at a person or a group of people eat” and it was just as absurd to watch a football game rather than play in one for yourself (one of Gaddafi's sons later signed for Serie A club Perugia). Bedouins “have no interest” in live sport, TV or cinema and “ridicule acting” as they live actively for themselves, not passively like Western couch-potatoes. In the Green Libyan Paradise of tomorrow, “Grandstands will disappear because no-one will be there to occupy them”, everyone being too busy playing for Juventus and AC Milan instead.

HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE

In 1993 Colonel G vomited ink again with an almost Borgesian (if Borges had no talent) collection of short quasi-fiction, *Escape to Hell*, and its 1995 sequel, *Illegal Publications*. Their basic motif is that the big city is Hell and the desert Heaven. The city is “life's nightmare... a cemetery for social ties” where

people are not full “human entities” but known only by their telephone numbers, a “mere worm-like (biological) living where man lives and dies meaninglessly”, where “men and cats are equal”. In Tripoli, children regularly faced “professional kidnappers” who stole them for their kidneys, or were “having their limbs amputated” for sale to anyone who wanted spares, while one small boy was sellotaped inside a cardboard box by his own friends then left in the middle of the road to be squashed by a passing motorist. No wonder “the child in the city grows up a man with psychological disorders”. City-homes are but “holes and caves”, their occupants mere “snails in their shells”, getting “more support” from their walls than their fellow men, as at least “you may lean against a wall”. You are taught to be passive, which is why you will often pass a football-stadium and witness “millions of other people watching 22 individuals... running after a small melon-like sack full of air in meaningless movements”, before “someone, who may happen to be drunk or insane,” claps, prompting the other lemmings to follow suit. Even worse were boxing-matches “between two seemingly grown-up sensible men”, events which “can in no way be justified” as “investigations show that there is no enmity among them”.

In “The Escape to Hell”, Gaddafi “merrily” flees Tripoli to live in Hades instead, as it is nicer. He fears the weight of public desires on his own shoulders, as “the tyranny of the masses is the cruellest kind of tyranny.” Citizens “bombard me with their demands” every waking moment: ‘Get us better telephone service! Have roads built for us in the sea! Catch enough fish for us! Write out [magical] amulets for us! Make wedding contracts for us! Get that stray dog out of our way! Buy a cat for us!’” Yet Gaddafi is “but a poor Bedouin, lost in a mad modern city” who “has never tasted alcohol or even Pepsi-Cola”. His tent upbringing makes him unsuited for his harsh national burden: “I, being an illiterate Bedouin, do not know about house-painting or the meaning of sewage-disposal. I use my hands to drink rain water and my cloak to filter out tadpoles. I do not know how to swim... I do not understand the concept of money, yet people ask me for it.” As for foreign policy, he cannot even spell the word “America”; all he knows is that “it was discovered by an Arab prince and not Columbus”. “I am a human being like you, I like apples.” But he can’t be left in peace to buy such tasty green fruit without voters continually chasing him “to thirstily drink up my essence, lick my sweat and inhale my breath... [The electorate] chase me like a rabid dog, dripping saliva... wherever I go, through cobwebs and esparto paper.”



GROUND CONTROL TO MAJOR NUT

Fortunately, in “The Blessed Herb and the Cursed Tree”, Gaddafi finds a fresh solution: “Good news for the emotionally disturbed of both sexes. A herb has been discovered in the Benghazi Plain, and it is now sold at Hajji Hassan’s shop. In a television interview watched by no less than three million people, Hajji Hassan stated the herb was an effective cure for the emotionally disturbed.” Hassan’s herb seems a metaphor for the curative fruits of the desert. The Earth is the only place this curative social herb can grow, as “biological life... depends on food”, which can only be grown in soil, not in the sky (“the sky is not very important to us without the Earth”). Thus: “The Earth is your real mother... so do not abuse your mother... gently clip her finger-nails, cleanse her and remove the dirt and filth from her body... Do not press her bosom by heavy constructions... otherwise, you shall certainly be regretful losers... When you kill the Earth, you commit suicide indeed.”

Such thoughts lead into Gaddafi’s best story, “Suicide of the Astronaut”, which condemns a NASA hero’s pointless forays into “giddy outer-space”. As Gaddafi had already proven, “for Man, bread, dates, milk, meat and water are vital”, and they only grow in soil, not interstellar vacuums – meaning that, after messing about near the Moon for a bit, “taking pictures of all the planets”, the astronaut has “to return to Earth from his outer-space escapade” for his tea. Back on terra firma, the hungry rocket-man sheds his space suit for a normal one in search of “an earthly job”, but he only knows how to fly spaceships, having no plumbing

qualifications, and so leaves the city for the countryside. A farmer feels sorry for him, asking if he is “attracted to the earth”, but the space-farer misunderstands and treats him to a long lecture on gravity, “parading his space-knowledge” instead. “I think I have answered the question fully now. As you see, I am well-informed in matters concerning the Earth,” concludes Neil Armstrong, expecting to get the job. But the farmer, clearly no Sky at Night fan, is unmoved by the astro-fool’s “space-journey with no tangible gains concerning his farm. What mattered to him was the distance between one farm and the other, not the distance between Earth and Jupiter. He was also interested in the volume of the yield of his farm and not the volume of Mercury. He felt very sorry for the begging pathetic astronaut and had the desire to give him some alms, but was unable to take him on as a farmhand. And so, having lost all hope of finding any bread-winning job on the Earth, the astronaut decided to commit suicide.” The End.

So effectively did Gaddafi implement the political aspect of his Green Book by abolishing all parliaments, parties, civil bodies, trade unions and legislatures other than the security forces and a few men in tents talking bollocks, that when he was finally deposed he left behind... nothing. No coherent state infrastructure whatsoever remained to be rebuilt upon, hence 10 years of glorious chaos.

With his hatred for capitalism, love of traditional rural ways of life, distaste for big cities and big industries and quasi-Marxist, anti-Western sympathies, Gaddafi led a very Green Party indeed. That his nation nonetheless remained wholly reliant on its vast fossil fuel reserves being sold on the open international free market during his 40-year reign of total hypocrisy implies that, whatever his many other literary shortcomings, Gaddafi had at least managed to master the difficult art of irony. It’s not easy being Green.

SOURCES

Escape to Hell and Illegal Publications are reproduced in their entirety online (fittingly, perhaps illegally so) at http://gator1530ghana-primary.hgstebuilder.com/booksbymuammargaddafi/index_alongside_The_Green_Book, which is all over the web elsewhere too, intellectual property clearly being theft to Arab Marxists. *Illegal Publications* is a scornful satire on extremist Islamic obscurantism and certain Libyan muftis’ alleged attempts to prevent Israeli spy satellites from photographing their donkeys by blinding them with prayers, optimistically intended by The Colonel to steer young radicals away from waging jihad against his own regime. See also Daniel Kalder, *Dictator Literature*, Oneworld, 2018, pp.229-240; Chris Mikul, *My Favourite Dictators*, Headpress, 2020, pp.186-213.

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Celebrating Saturnalia

MATT SALUSBURY asks whether the origins of Christmas lie in an older pagan holiday marked by feasting, drinking and fighting dwarfs...

A public holiday celebrated around 25 December in the family home – a time for the exchange of gifts, feasting and decorating trees. Christmas? No, this was Saturnalia, the pagan Roman Winter Solstice festival. But did the Christian festival of Christmas really have its origins in pagan Saturnalia?

Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus described Saturnalia as “the best of times”: small gifts were exchanged, dress codes were relaxed, social roles were inverted. Masters and slaves were expected to swap clothes, the wealthy to pay the month’s rent for those who couldn’t afford it. Households rolled dice to choose a temporary Saturnalian monarch, who wore a *pilleus* – a pointy hat. In Lucian of Samosata’s first century poem *Saturnalia*, the god Cronos (Saturn) says: “During my week the serious is barred: no business allowed. Drinking and being drunk, noise and games of dice, appointing of kings and feasting of slaves, singing naked, clapping... an occasional ducking of corked faces in icy water...”

Saturnalia was very ancient, beginning as a farmer’s festival to mark the end of the autumn planting season in honour of Saturn (*satus* means sowing). Holly was one of several evergreen plants associated with Saturn. The foundation stone of the first Temple of Saturn at the edge of Rome’s forum was laid when Rome was still a kingdom, around 495 BC, and completed as Rome became a Republic. Numerous archaeological sites



“Drinking and being drunk, noise and games of dice...”

from the coastal province of Constantine, now in Algeria, demonstrate that the cult of Saturn survived there until the third century AD.

Saturnalia grew in duration and moved to progressively later dates during the Roman period. In the reign of the Emperor Augustus (63 BC-AD 14), it was a two-day affair, starting on 17 December, heralded by sacrifices at the Temple of Saturn and shouts of “Io Saturnalia!” By the time Lucian described the festivities it had become a seven-day event.

From as early as 217 BC, and probably much earlier, there were public Saturnalia banquets. Rome cancelled executions and refrained from declaring war during the festival. Pagan Roman authorities tried to curtail Saturnalia; Emperor Caligula (AD 12-41) tried – with little success – to restrict it to five days.

The popularity of Saturnalia

is shown by an incident in AD 43 during the disembarkation of legions of the Emperor Claudius to invade Britain. Mutiny was brewing on the Gaulish coast – legionnaires refused to leave the known world for uncharted territory. Up stepped Tiberius Claudius Narcissus, freedman (former slave) of the Emperor and the most influential figure in his court, urging the legions to board the ships. Seeing a freedman taking charge reminded them of a fun festival, they broke into a chant of “Io Saturnalia!” This lightened the mood and the legionaries agreed to set sail.

It may have been the Emperor Domitian (AD 51-96) who moved Saturnalia to 25 December in an attempt to assert his authority. He curbed Saturnalia’s subversive tendencies by marking it with lavish events under his control. The poet Statius (AD 45-95), in his *Silvae* describes the entertainments Domitian presided over. Games opened with fruit, nuts and sweets showered on the crowd and featured flights of flamingos released over Rome. These were Rome’s first ever illuminated night-time shows, with female gladiators and fighting dwarfs.

The Emperor Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in AD

312 started imperial patronage of Christian churches, but Christianity didn’t become the Roman Empire’s official religion overnight. Dr David Gwynn, reader in ancient history at Royal Holloway, University of London, told me: “Saturnalia continued to be celebrated in the century afterward”. The poet Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius wrote another *Saturnalia*, describing a banquet of pagan literary celebrities in Rome. Dated to between AD 383 and 430, it describes a Saturnalia alive and well under Christian emperors. The calendar of Polemius Silvus, from around AD 449, mentions Saturnalia “used to honour the god Saturn,” so by then it had become just another popular carnival.

However, there’s a rival contender for Saturnalia as the inspiration for Christmas – the festival of *dies natalis solis invicti*, “birthday of the unconquered sun”, a Roman public holiday on 25 December. Originating in the monotheistic cult of Mithras, *sol invictus* was introduced in AD 274 by Emperor Aurelian, who effectively made it a state religion. *Sol invictus* flourished because it was able to assimilate aspects of Jupiter and other deities into its figure of the Sun King. But in spite of efforts by later pagan emperors to control Saturnalia and absorb the winter festival into an official cult, the *sol invictus* civil holiday ended up closely resembling the ancient Saturnalia.

Constantine was brought up in the *sol invictus* cult, in what was already a predominantly monotheistic empire: “It is therefore possible,” says Dr Gwynn, “that Christmas was intended to replace this festival (*sol invictus*) rather than Saturnalia.”

♦ **MATT SALUSBURY** is Chair of the National Union of Journalists London Freelance Branch, Chair of the trustees of Dunwich Museum and a regular *Fortean Times* contributor.

The Seventies: Ufology's Golden Age

NIGEL WATSON looks back at a heady decade filled with increasingly close encounters, active UFO groups, groundbreaking magazines and ufological acronyms galore...

To me, the 1970s was the Golden Age of ufology. It was a time when local, national and international groups held regular meetings and cases were reported and discussed in a growing number of magazines. We hammered out letters and articles on typewriters and used landline telephones. Abduction and high-strangeness reports were just about being accepted by ufologists, Roswell was still a footnote in history and Rendlesham was yet to come.

The Apollo Moon landing missions led to my interest in UFOs. I started by collecting newspaper clippings that mentioned anything related to space exploration, and at the local library I got any book available on the subject. On the same shelves were books about UFOs and I inevitably gravitated towards them. Some featured sober stories of 'respectable' people seeing strange things in the sky and the USAF investigations into the matter, written by the likes of Donald Keyhoe.

There were also plenty of contactee books by George Adamski and George Hunt Williamson, who said they'd actually met the space people and been taken on trips inside their saucers. Eileen Buckle's 1967 book *The Scorpion Mystery* impressed me because it related to events in England. Later, I was disappointed to read Norman Oliver's criticism of the case in his 1968 *Sequel to Scorpion* and his conclusion that it was a hoax.



At the time I was open to the idea that spaceships might be visiting us. Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods* seemed to confirm that they had been coming here for thousands of years. The Apollo missions had made it logical to think that if we could leave our 'cradle' then alien intelligences could have done so long ago. This type of reasoning was certainly used in Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, which I saw in the early 1970s.

From one of the UFO books I got the address of *Flying Saucer Review*, and I started subscribing straight away. In its pages, the writings of John Keel indicated that the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis (ETH) might be found wanting when applied to UFO reports. I started getting the *Merseyside UFO Bulletin* (later *Magonia*), which maintained a sceptical outlook towards the ETH and promoted other aspects of the 'new ufology.' Another big influence on me was Bob Rickard's *The News* (now, of course, better known as *Fortean Times*). Since I had already begun cutting out 'space' stories in the newspapers it wasn't a big leap to start sending clippings and articles to *The News*. In the meantime, I collected reports of UFO and paranormal events in my home town of Scunthorpe and the surrounding county of Lincolnshire. Using this

To raise funds, we even ran a few 'UFO Discos' in the main hall

material, I wrote a few short articles about UFO sightings in the area for the local newspapers. These put me in contact with a couple of other people interested in the subject. One day I met the organiser of the Grange Farm Hobbies Centre and he suggested setting up a UFO group. He put an announcement in the local press asking for people to come to an introductory meeting. I didn't expect much of a turn-out, but was shocked and pleased to find a room full of people enthusiastic about starting a new organisation. After much deliberation we called ourselves the Scunthorpe UFO Research Society (SUFORS). For about two years or so we had weekly meetings at the Hobbies Centre. Here we would bring the latest UFO books and magazines and discuss the various theories to account for UFO reports. John Keel and his view that UFOs were some kind of inter-dimensional force that could come in and out of our time frame/dimension was much in favour.

One or two members were

LEFT: Scunthorpe's answer to Fox Mulder looks to the skies in 1978.

staunch supporters of George Adamski, but the rest of us were sceptical. We established a small library of books, but SUFORS was mainly a social group. To raise funds to pay for the hire of the room we even ran a few 'UFO Discos' in the main hall; they proved so popular that the Centre started running its own. After the initial enthusiasm the group settled down to a core of about 10 members. Over time, we began to meet socially – mainly in pubs – and it no longer seemed necessary to hold formal meetings.

Not long after forming, about six of us piled into a Bedford Workabus and spent a week visiting Warminster, Stonehenge, Silbury Hill and Glastonbury. We visited Cradle Hill and did a bit of skywatching, but only saw a few other UFO-seekers. Indeed, it would have been hard to tell that Warminster had been a hotbed of UFO activity. To relieve the boredom, we hid behind a bush when some American ufologists came up Cradle Hill one night. Using a metal detector, we blasted eerie electronic sounds into the air; the visitors were excited and delighted by this alien activity and probably went home thinking they had encountered the notorious 'thing'.

On the same trip we met Molly Carey, who had taken hundreds of photos of Stonehenge showing what appeared to be various forms and figures chiselled into the rock; these were probably created by the effects of shadows and a dose of imagination – just like the structures later 'seen' in Mars space probe pictures.

Later in the 1970s I made two more visits to Frome and Warminster. The only sign of a UFO came one night we were driving to Frome. Along with two other cars, we stopped at the side of the road to watch a group of lights flying slowly towards us;



after several minutes we heard the sound of engines and saw that the object was an airship with lights attached to it. If it had not come closer we would have been convinced that we'd seen a saucer.

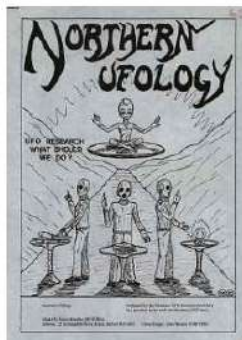
Another trip involved meeting the distinguished old Lincolnshire folklorist Ethel Rudkin. Many years earlier she had written a detailed account of Black Dog reports in Lincolnshire for the Folklore Society. Over a fine spread of tea and scones she said she had thought about sending up a kite before we arrived to make us think it was a UFO. She obviously had a good sense of humour and was intrigued to learn how the folklore of black dogs had a link with UFOs.

Through contact with David Rees and Jenny Randles, SUFORs joined their regional collective of UFO groups, which eventually became NUFON (the National UFO Network). We even ran their fourth conference at the Scunthorpe Film Theatre on 24 June 1978, where Gary Heseltine, who lived in Scunthorpe at that time, made an appearance. Tickets for a full day of talks cost an astonishing £1.50. In the *Checkpoint* science fiction fanzine (no. 90, July 1978) Darroll Pardee wrote: "We went to the '4th Northern UFO Network Conference' in Scunthorpe on the last Saturday in June: it was organised by a group of the 'New' ufologists: i.e., those who regard the phenomenon as subjective rather than objective. The audience was less than might be hoped (about 40), but the audience did include a number of vocal old-guard ufologists who provided a bit of verbal confrontation (including one amazing person who dragged in Ur of the Chaldees and the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*)... In the morning we saw some movie film of UFOs, which wouldn't have convinced anybody, but apparently is the best available, UFOs being notoriously shy of cine-cameras. And as a change from the serious stuff, the evening was devoted to a two-hour show of clips from SF films given by Philip Jenkinson, including a complete version of Melies' 1903 trip to the moon film."

By this time the SUFORs was



ABOVE LEFT: A fresh-faced young Nigel makes an early appearance in the local press. ABOVE RIGHT: A 1979 edition of NUFON's *Northern Ufology*.



virtually a spent force. Two of our most charismatic members had gone on a quest to India, but via a nasty traffic accident in Turkey, they ended up in Sheffield (don't ask!) We did keep the group going by inviting guest speakers. Rex Dutta the publisher of *Viewpoint Aquarius* magazine visited us twice. He was well dressed and well spoken, and I think he drove an E-Type Jaguar. On one of these occasions he hypnotised a few people in the audience. He was a promoter of Adamski and other contactee cases and was into New Age topics.

During the 1970s I became more interested in collecting evidence. After interviewing several UFO witnesses, including my own grandmother, I realised that detailed descriptions of 'things' in the sky did not amount to much. What people actually saw was open to all types of physical or even psychological interpretation.

As NUFON and Jenny Randles's UFO career progressed she was able to pass on to me what were then called "high strangeness" cases. Many of these were reported after the release of Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I was lucky enough to attend a preview screening of the film in London. It wasn't quite what I expected, but it was a visually striking movie that brought to life the weird world of ufology, even if you'd never heard of Hynek or Vallee.

My high strangeness

investigations were supplied to UFOIN and published in 'MUFOB', and were eventually collected and expanded in my 1990 book *Portraits of Alien Encounters*. These close encounters contained as many ambiguities and as little solid evidence as previous sightings of lights in the sky. Shirley Melver, who was writing a thesis about ufology as part of her degree course in Behavioural Science, attended several of the interviews I conducted with UFO witnesses. Discussions with her and contact with MUFOB writers – particularly John Kimmer and the late Peter Rogerson – encouraged me to start studying with the Open University. In the 1980s I gained a degree in psychology after five years of part-time study.

In the 1970s I also started going through old newspaper files to collect historical UFO and fortan reports. This was mainly inspired by articles in *FSR* by Carl Grove, Jerome Clark, John Keel and Roger Sandell that discussed phantom airship and Spring-heeled Jack sightings in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Granville Oldroyd conducted intensive research into these areas and passed on most of his findings. This resulted in a series of articles and a catalogue of British 1913 airship reports in the 1980s and the eventual publication of my books *The Scareship Mystery* (2000) and *UFOs of the First World War* (2015).

Looking back, I think we were

inclined to think that there was some form of paranormal and/or mental interface between us and the aliens. With the inspiration of Carl Jung in the 1950s and the writings of John Keel, it did seem likely that "they" could directly or indirectly influence our minds, culture and society.

For me, ufology was also important on a social and educational level. I gained a circle of friends in Scunthorpe that increasingly included people who were not directly interested in UFOs, and I regularly corresponded with ufologists and witnesses throughout Britain. One unknown consequence of my communications was revealed by Malcolm Jensen many years later: "Nigel Watson came into my life circa 1979 when I related to him my 1975 sighting. Years later he was responsible for introducing me, through common interests, to a lady who was to become my wife. 34 years later, still is! Avril and her mum had a close encounter of the first kind in 1969 at Washingborough, Lincs, and the object was picked up on radar and reported in the press. My wife has an alternative brain-wiring with her high-functioning autism/Aspergers, and therefore is a stickler for the smallest detail. It could also be that this alternative brain-wiring is a key factor in the amazing amount of experiences she has had both before our union and during."

As I noted earlier, the psychological aspects of ufology finally encouraged me to take a degree in the subject and made me even more sceptical of the ETH and UFO theories in general. In addition, I went off to study Film and Literature at the University of Warwick, which helped me look at how UFOs are represented in popular entertainment and how such cultural influences have had an impact on 'real' ufology.

Since then, ufology has changed for good and ill, but I still find it a fascinating subject that has taken me from Scunthorpe to the wildest frontiers of Magonia.

◆ NIGEL WATSON has been a ufologist and FT contributor for longer than he or anyone else can remember and currently writes the Saucers of the Damned column.

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What is pseudoscience?

Ross MacFarlane finds a study of “fringe science” to be illuminating, though it misses the importance of both personal experience and social media

On the Fringe

Where Science Meets Pseudoscience

Michael D Gordin

Oxford University Press 2021

Hb, 120pp, £14.99, ISBN 9780197555767

“Pseudoscience is not a real thing.” As opening lines go, that’s quite a provocation. With eye-catching flair, historian of science Michael D Gordin is establishing a definition that pseudoscience is a negative category, not a term anyone would identify with themselves. To Gordin it is a term completely interlinked with science, so much so that one cannot exist without the other. In *On the Fringe*, he explores their intertwining, attempting to define what a pseudoscience is (and was) and how a history of pseudoscience brings out a history of science, too.

The book starts with a search for clear definitions. Gordin first discusses “falsification”, philosopher Karl Popper’s approach to what he described as the “demarcation problem”: if your scientific theory cannot be falsified by experiment, then you are a pseudoscientist. So, in Popper’s terms, science is not about proving something “true”, but showing that things have “not yet been proven false”.

However, Gordin finds falsification unconvincing, following the lead of recent philosophers of science who have shown its problems: for instance, several have asked how falsifiable discoveries in disciplines like geology and cosmology – made incrementally over time, rather than confirmed in a laboratory – might be. According to a strictly Popperian approach, their findings should be treated as “pseudoscience”, and struck from the scientific record, an idea Gordin

finds preposterous.

Instead of a one-size-fits-all method to divide pseudoscience from science, the author suggests trying to group fringe doctrines together to spot similarities. For the rest of the book, he explores this approach, looking at groupings he classifies as vestigial sciences, hyperpoliticised sciences, counterestablishment sciences and “mind over matter”.

For vestigial sciences, Gordin looks at alchemy and astrology: concepts that held sway for centuries but fell out of fashion over time. The chapter serves as a reminder of how science is not a stable entity but something in constant flux: change over time is at the heart of how science works. Astrology and alchemy were both establishment disci-

plines but “fringed out” as thinking changed. He also allows the reader to ponder how

some beliefs may still be held after scientific thinking moves on: I cannot be the only person to still think of Pluto as a planet even, as Gordin notes, it was downgraded from that status in 2006.

In his grouping of hyperpoliticised sciences, Gordin brings together ideas tied to ideological concepts. He describes the attempts to create an anti-Semitic Aryan Physics in Nazi Germany, Lysenko’s version of genetics under Stalinism and the rise and fall of notions of eugenics before the Second World War.

In his notion of counterestab-

The gold standard of scientific testing came from methods used by the SPR to test Spiritualists

lishment sciences, Gordin groups together beliefs that he suggests seek to demonstrate their legitimacy by borrowing from the techniques and structures of science, such as topic-specific journals, membership bodies and conferences. By doing so they are positioning themselves as the real scientists, acting against what they perceive as a closed-shop establishment ignoring their discoveries. Here we encounter a range of subjects ranging from phrenology to Creationism. FT readers may be particularly interested in Gordin’s brief takes on ufology and cryptozoology.

In his last grouping, Gordin brings together studies of parapsychological phenomena, moving from the Mesmeric salons in 18th-century France to Spiritualists in Victorian parlours and investigations in ESP in 20th-century university settings (and the rise of debunkers dismissing this work). Also notable is his reminder that the forms of scientific testing now held to be the “gold standard” – eg double blind randomised trials – emerged from methods used to test Spiritualists by early members of the Society for Psychical Research.

He concludes with a chapter framed around the questions “Who is to blame?” and “What is to be done?” Here he discusses notions of science denialism and links to corporations, showing how the playbook first created by

cigarette companies who funded their own research streams to argue for “scientific” legitimacy has been drawn on by other businesses. We end with our current fractious times with anti-vax movements, for which Gordin provides historical context.

However, the book seems to end with a slight shrug of the shoulders. To Gordin, so emmeshed is pseudoscience with science that the only way to get rid of pseudoscience would be to do away with science. The book is only 100 pages long, so his pen portraits of disciplines have to be brief – though it does have an excellent bibliography for those who want more detail. It is often focused on America and slightly betrays the research specialisms of its author. It is also surprising, particularly in his concluding chapter, that there is no mention of the role of social media in these debates.

In wondering why people may become attracted to a particular fringe group, Gordin offers reasons such as a sense of community and a genuine wish for the truth. What is missing are those who base their interest on personal experience and a consideration of why that can be a defining factor for a change of viewpoint. It is an omission that also makes me wonder what Charles Fort would make of the demarcation problem. His belief that “One measures a circle beginning anywhere” suggests a fortean viewpoint would be able to encompass both science and pseudoscience and view them both with a wink and a raised eyebrow. Perhaps the most fortean place to begin measuring that circle would be on the fringe Gordin traverses in his illuminating book.

★★★★



A saga of Sievekings

Phil Baker explores an embarrassment of riches in our former editor's ancestral story

From Hamburg To London

A Sieveking Family History

Paul Sieveking

Privately published 2021

Hb, 200pp, £25 inc p&p from sieveking@forteanimes.com



The magnificent if notoriously snobbish novelist Anthony Powell was so obsessed by family trees and

breeding that he even took a keen interest in the work of Professor Steve Jones, a snail geneticist. He'd have been fascinated by the present book, which inevitably makes you think of the nature-versus-nurture debate as it follows the almost embarrassingly talented Sieveking family over 500 years or more; they are also of interest to readers of this magazine because they produced former editor Paul Sieveking himself, a seminal figure in the history of *Fortean Times* alongside founding editor Bob Rickard.

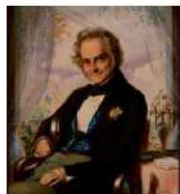
Georg Heinrich Sieveking, born in Hamburg in 1751, was a merchant, maths prodigy, polymath and Freemason who wrote a paean to freedom that was still used in anti-Nazi broadcasting in 1939. Karl Sieveking became "Ambassador Extraordinary to Brazil", while Amalie Sieveking distinguished herself as a teacher and a pioneering cholera nurse, and Edward Sieveking, also medically inclined, became a doctor and in due course physician to the British royal

family.

There seems to be nothing these Sievekings can't do: Martinus Sieveking was noted both as a pianist and circus-style strong man, while Alejandro Sieveking was an eminent Chilean playwright, driven into exile during the Pinochet years, who returned to become vice-president of the Chilean Academy of Fine Arts.

One of the fascinations of the book is watching the family interact with history, with Gustav Sieveking at the Battle of Waterloo and Edward Sieveking (a different one) caught up in what is said to be the world's first global financial crash, in 1857, after the paddle steamer the *SS Central America* sank with 10 tons of gold on board. Meanwhile Luise Sieveking was in Hamburg during the Napoleonic War, when the city was occupied by the French, and recorded in her journal that cats were a favourite dish of the soldiery, cooked in oil taken from street lamps.

Paul's father Lance Sieveking was a wartime aviator, novelist, and early avant-garde radio producer for the BBC, and he has already been the subject of a biography by Paul (reviewed in



ABOVE: Edward Heinrich Sieveking (1790-1868).

FT313:61-62).

Although Paul doesn't emphasise it, this book brings home the tragedy of the First and Second World Wars, with its multitude of more than decent Germans, and in recent years Paul has been reunited with the German side of the family.

This is an exemplary model of a family history – even if Paul did have extraordinary material to work from, he's done a terrific job with it, with 133 illustrations and an index.

What we want now, of course, is his own autobiography...

★★★★★

A Most Peculiar Book

The Inherent Strangeness of the Bible

Kristin Swenson

Oxford University Press 2021

Hb, 261pp, £18.99, ISBN 9780190651732

Censoring God

The History of the Lost Books (and other Excluded Scriptures)

Jim Willis

Visible Ink 2021

Pb, 328pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781578597321

These two books complement each other, but are nowhere near equal in quality. *A Most Peculiar Book* is about the contradictions and oddities in the Bible. It starts with the complexity of just what we mean by "the Bible" – is it the Protestant volume of 66 books (plus, occasionally, the Apocrypha, sandwiched uncomfortably between the Old and New Testaments); is it the Catholic Bible which includes the Apocrypha as an integral part of the OT; or is it the slightly different Orthodox Bible? *Censoring God* is about books that didn't make it into the Bible: not just the Apocrypha but apocryphal gospels, different versions of the Genesis Creation story and much more.

The Bible, says Swenson, is "a cacophonous gathering of disparate voices". Anyone who believes it's the straightforward word of God will hate her book. She describes the Bible as it is: a bunch of accounts that have been rewritten and edited over many centuries, often by people with an agenda. Many of the stories – including those about Jesus – may not be factually true; biblical writers weren't "on-the-ground journalists", she says. "Perhaps what the stories can tell us, when loosed from their literalist bonds, is more interesting, even more important, than whether or not they are 'true' in terms of historical reporting" – as good a definition of the word "myth" as you'll find.

Many of the assumptions we've been conditioned to make about the Bible simply aren't accurate. For example, there are two separate and slightly different lists of the Ten Commandments, and it's difficult getting either of them

to add up to 10. We all know that David killed Goliath – but that's only one account; elsewhere we read that it was actually someone called Elhanan, one of David's fighters – but in a third version we read that Elhanan killed Goliath's brother, not Goliath.

A fascinating section of Swenson's book is where she looks at what we all "know" the Bible teaches on sex, marriage, homosexuality and abortion – and what it *actually* says, which is very often nothing like what Christian moralists tell us.

Censoring God would have been a whole lot better had Willis concentrated on factual information, rather than constantly reverting to essentially a conspiracy theory. Yes, different people at different times did decide which texts would or would not be included in the Bible – but not, as he keeps suggesting, "A committee once stood between us and the truth."

Why do some texts not get into the Bible? "The reasons are more probably tied up in the idea of secret wisdom that was deemed too dangerous to include." This and similar unsubstantiated assumptions litter his book. He indulges in meaningless speculation: "What if Moses wasn't quite human at all?"

What if he was... an alien entity...?" He uses "what if" six times in that one paragraph, finishing "Each one of these approaches will work." And it will – in the realms of fantasy.

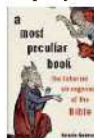
There are many reasons why books were included or excluded, or edited, often many times. One he ignores was simply popularity – and so how often frequently read scrolls would be copied, and so more likely to be included when compilations were made.

Both books have at times an irritating voice. Swenson, as a professor of Religious Studies, should know better than to be so chatty – especially in a book published by OUP; sometimes this gets in the way of the serious points she's making. Willis has a discursive style which often wanders away from his immediate subject; he desperately needed an editor to keep him to the point.

Jay Vickers

Swenson ★★★★★

Willis ★★





Heroines of Olympus

The Women of Greek Mythology

Ellie Mackin Roberts

Wellbeck 2020

Hb, 208pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781787394926

Ancient Greece was not a good place to be a woman. In wartime, women were trophies, as in the tale of Cassandra. It seems that if a man, whether a god or a legendary hero, took a fancy to a woman he had every right to make her pregnant or force her into marriage against her will. Women were the spoils of war, and they were property. There's a terrifying amount of sexual violence in Greek myth too. I didn't have to get far into this book to work out that the heroes of Greek legend were anything but. They may have been brave in battle, but they were absolutely obnoxious everywhere else.

Retelling these myths from a feminist perspective demonstrates that in myth, at least, women were depicted outside traditional roles. While many goddesses are occupied with domestic life – hearth, home and childbirth – others, such as Eris, Goddess of Discord, start wars which kill hundreds of mortals just for the Hades of it. And female deities achieve truly legendary levels of fury, rarely tempered with justice; when a goddess is angered, she's likely to take it out on the victim. Callisto's rape by Zeus was taken personally by a furious Artemis, punishing Callisto for breaking her vow of celibacy by turning her into a bear and then shooting her. Alternative versions suggest it was Callisto's son who shot his mother by accident. Either way, upon her death Callisto was taken into the heavens, immortalised as the constellation Ursa Major.

Mackin Roberts tells us that Greek mythology isn't composed of moral tales. It doesn't suggest better ways to live; the princess doesn't escape from the tower into happily ever after. Gods and goddesses have the same foibles as human beings but amplified to the nth degree. The gods eat their young, they (frequently) turn into animals to seduce any girls that take their fancy and they're not averse to incest. The



nymph Daphne was fortunate; better to be turned into a laurel tree than to be ravished by a smitten Apollo.

Heroines of Olympus has four pages on each mythological woman, one of which is a picture in the style of Greek pottery, black silhouetted against an orange background. Switching the focus of Greek myths to bring women, so frequently the supporting cast, to the fore is refreshing and provides a modern take on some very old stories. *Heroines of Olympus* deserves a place on every school library's Classics shelf.

Paula Dempsey

★★★★★

New Blood

Critical Approaches to Contemporary Horror

Eddie Falvey, Jonathan Wroot & Joe Hickinbottom, eds

University of Wales Press 2021

Pb, 288pp, £45, ISBN 9781786836342

New Blood sets out to survey horror films made since the turn of the millennium. While its emphasis is on new independent films it acknowledges the contribution of established studios. The synergy between the two sectors has allowed the horror genre to maintain its pre-eminent position in old and new media. Twelve essays range from "The New Independent Prestige Horror" to "Streaming Netflix Original Horror" to an appraisal of the work and reputation of Takashi Miike.

The editors argue that revisionist twists allow the Final Girl protagonist (so endemic in slasher movies) to strike back in *The Final Girl* (2015), *Happy Death Day* (2017) and the 2018 *Halloween* reboot. This emphasis on female empowerment is built on by Eddie Falvey in "Revisiting The Female Monster" showing how werewolves and vampires can be found to be fundamentally sexed, imparting ideas about social and sexual difference. Taking an even more fortein twist she illustrates her thesis through *Teeth* (2007), in which a teenager uses her vagina dentata to defend herself.

The new horror in TV began with *True Blood*, they suggest, using allegories based on gay (God Hates Fags!) oppression, moving on to the existential terror of *The*



Walking Dead (inspired by the 2008 economic crash) and *Black Mirror*, utilising a more British approach. Of most interest to forteans will be Abigail Whittall's essay on the history of Nazi horror and how it has been reimagined. The modern approach was exemplified in *Hellboy* (2004), *The Devil's Rock* (2011), *Frankenstein's Army* (2013) and *Overlord* (2018); these involve scientists and archaeologists from the Ahnenerbe, the SS branch which promoted Nazi racial doctrines through archaeological research.

An interesting collection but very much aimed towards an academic audience. It achieves its purpose in presenting a review of the mutations in tropes and films made since 2000, but its main attraction to forteans will be bringing fresh films to their attention.

Páirc O'Corráin

★★★★★

Decoding Jung's Metaphysics

The archetypal semantics of an experiential universe

Bernardo Kastrup

If Books 2021

Pb, 141 pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781789045659

Jung might have been horrified by this book. He steadfastly denied that he was a philosopher, insisting instead that he was a rigorous empiricist. Yet many of his conclusions, as Bernardo Kastrup adroitly demonstrates in this important and invigorating book, have unavoidable metaphysical consequences. But Jung was certainly not a systematic philosopher. His metaphysical speculations evolve and are constantly re-cast in often confusing ways. That's why Kastrup's careful exegesis, which shows a consistent and thrilling theme, is so valuable.

Jung posited that the Universe was alive – throbbing with meaning. The collective unconscious (which in later life he increasingly identified with God) spawned and cradled both the personal unconscious and the ego-consciousness with which we usually identify.

The architecture of the collective unconscious was, for him, defined by the primordial templates that he called archetypes. Those archetypes affect the org-

anisation of the physical world: the commonly recognised chains of cause and effect aren't the whole story. This different kind of organisation accounts for the phenomenon we all know as "synchronicity". Along with many physicists on the frontiers of research, you might well think that it's a more coherent account of the quantum world than the tired old canons of Newtonian causation. This supplementary explanation for the behaviour of the natural world might, says Kastrup, entail not "relationships of strict necessity, but tendencies, affinities or dispositions instead." I can see Rupert Sheldrake nodding and saying: "Yes, morphic resonance."

Jung's archetypes are closely akin to Plato's forms. Unembodied abstractions relate in a clear but weird way to the physical world.



Human population trends, for instance, are well modelled by equations that include the value pi. Why should the ratio of a circumference of a circle to its diameter relate to the way that humans behave? It's very odd.

Anyone who knows Kastrup's work will realise where he's going with this. Kastrup is the most articulate modern exponent of philosophical idealism – the notion, very roughly, that all is Mind. And he wants to have Jung on his side. But there is no misrepresentation of Jung. For Jung was an idealist too. He believed that spirit, matter and psyche were essentially forms of the same thing – the transcendental being: the cosmic Mind that is the ground and substance of all being.

This doesn't mean that there is no "real" material world. There is, but it is composed of Mind. In modern parlance, Jung was an objective realist. Nor does it mean – as Don Cupitt and many others have said it does – that Jung thought that religion was "all in the mind". Religion is indeed about the Mind – but so is everything else, including "matter". Kastrup's rehabilitation of the metaphysical coherence of religion might well prove to be this book's most lasting contribution.

Kastrup's book won't be easy for non-philosophers. But it's well worth the effort.

Charles Foster

★★★★★

Time and a word – or more

Andrew May examines two very different approaches to the complex subject of time travel

10 Short Lessons in Time Travel

Brian Clegg

Michael O'Mara Books 2021

Hb, 186 pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781789292916

Time Travel

The Science and Science Fiction

Nick Redfern

Visible Ink Press 2021

Pb, 332 pp, £14.99, ISBN 9781578597239

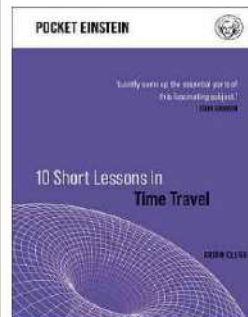
About the only common factor between these two books, apart from having “time travel” in the title, is that I thoroughly enjoyed both of them. I’m an established fan of both authors, owning a total of 16 books by them. But they’re on opposite sides of my living room, Brian Clegg on the science shelf and Nick Redfern filed under *fortean*.

And therein lies the difference between these two books. Redfern focuses on the fascinating but largely anecdotal evidence for anomalistic time travel in human history, while Clegg approaches the subject from the equally fascinating standpoint of modern physics.

It’s not Clegg’s first outing in this area. Ten years ago, in *How to Build a Time Machine*, he produced as perfect a book-length account of the serious science of time travel as you’ll find anywhere. His new book has a more lightweight feel, with plentiful boxouts and other magazine-style page furniture, including a list of the top five time traveller destinations from the age of dinosaurs to the JFK assassination.

Among the many large-font pull quotes, FT readers will be delighted to see one from our own Jenny Randles: “Distort time and you open the barriers that prevent us from travelling to the future or the past.” That’s in the context of Einstein’s theory of relativity, thanks to which many physicists believe that – in principle at least – time travel ought to be possible.

Turning to practicalities, Clegg discusses several possible ways to create a “closed time-like curve”, which is science-speak for a time machine. These range from Ron Mallett’s laboratory-scale ring laser proposal to vast cosmic constructs like Tipler cylinders and wormholes. But there’s much less detail on these topics than in



Clegg’s previous book – because, I suspect, this one is aimed at readers with a shorter attention span.

Several of the chapters – or “lessons”, to adopt the book’s central conceit – take wide-ranging detours into surrounding territory, from space drives and suspended animation to brain-twisting philosophical paradoxes.

An endemic problem with modern physics, as far as science communicators are concerned, is that it’s almost exclusively concerned either with invisibly small subatomic particles, or with unimaginably vast cosmic scales.

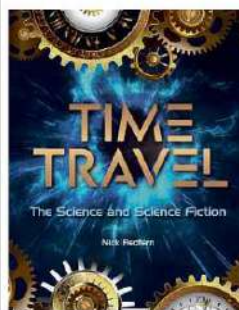
Time travel, insofar as it’s allowed within the known laws of physics, is no exception. This makes it difficult to describe in a way that’s easily relatable to the ordinary reader. Fortunately this is something Clegg is extremely good at, and the result is a relaxed and entertaining read on a potentially difficult and abstruse topic.

For Nick Redfern, on the other hand, finding a human angle is no problem at all. After a few cursory pages on wormholes and

suchlike at the start, his book is essentially about ordinary people having extraordinary experiences. He covers a wide range of *fortean*-type topics, from precognitive dreams to time-slips like the famous Moberly-Jourdain incident at Versailles. His approach is *fortean* too, not pushing any particular theory but just presenting the data and leaving readers to make up their own minds.

Speaking for myself, it seems fairly obvious that – if there’s anything to these stories at all – they have more to do with the psychic or paranormal world than with wormholes or closed timelike curves.

As for more explicit claims of time travel, Redfern devotes a couple of chapters to the intriguing history of the Philadelphia experiment – the fascination of which lies, as much as anything,



in the way the claims grew and developed over time. There’s also a chapter on the Internet’s most famous time traveller, John Titor, who (20 years on) seems to have come from a completely different “future” than the one we’re actually heading towards.

Just like Clegg, Redfern has a tendency to wander around his core subject, finding loose connections in such cosily familiar *fortean* topics as Bigfoot, crop circles and the Roswell incident. But I’m not complaining – it all adds to the entertainment value!

Clegg ★★★★★
Redfern ★★★★★

Serial Killers

The Minds, Methods and Mayhem of History’s Most Notorious Murderers

Richard Estep

Visible Ink Press 2021

Pb, 400pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781578597079

Serial killing is a popular subject for those indulging in criminal extremism, reading about the horrors of HH Holmes and his “murder castle”, the transatlantic monsters John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy and Dennis Rader, and Britain’s Dennis Nilsen and John Christie. Denver paramedic Richard Estep has now further enriched the literature.

The book deals with a population of mainly US and UK serial killers, largely based on published sources, in print or on the Internet. The problem is that it is not factually reliable. Those Edinburgh fiends, Burke and Hare, are wrongly described as resurrection men, whereas in reality they stuck to murder and never robbed any graves. Ludicrously, their surgeon associate is given the ill-deserved accolade of “Sir Robert Knox”!

In a similar vein, the Jack the Ripper chapter names one of the suspects as Prince Albert, consort to Queen Victoria (he died in 1861) instead of his grandson Prince Albert Victor, thought by some deluded Ripperologists to have been the murderer. JG Haigh never lived at 79 Gloucester Road, he just rented some basement rooms as a workshop, used to digest the bodies of some of his victims in large barrels of acid. Hopefully, the many transatlantic cases are better researched in this book from a US publisher.

The selection of serial killers appears to have been performed more or less at random; a perfectly good London murderer like Patrick Mackay is unaccountably left out, and the non-existent “Sawney Bean” tribe of Scottish cannibals included. The book is not annotated but has a brief list of sources at the end. The illustrations are numerous but often of a low quality and of dubious relevance to the matters discussed. This is the kind of book that nasty teenagers would like, but it has little to offer to the serious student of criminology. Jan Bondeson

★ ★



COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

STEVE TOASE PRESENTS HIS LATEST PICKS FROM THE WORLD OF SEQUENTIAL ART



Megatropolis, Book One

Kenneth Niemand, Dave Taylor
Rebellion Publishing, 2021

Hb, pp96, £19.99, ISBN 9781781089354

In the world of Judge Dredd, Mega City One is as iconic a character as any of the judges and criminals who populate its streets. That means any re-imagining has to strike a careful balance: it has to be different enough to attract an audience, but familiar enough to be recognisable. *Megatropolis* strikes just that balance.

Delving deep into noir, the comic follows Officer Amy Jarra and Detective Joe Rico as they investigate a series of murders. Many Dredd regulars appear in different roles; reporters, high society psychics, and the mayor. Also, as any longtime reader of *2000AD* would expect, there are pop culture nods throughout.

This book is gorgeous. From the Art Deco endpapers to the vehicle designs and architecture, *Megatropolis* demonstrates how comics are able to evoke a cast of thousands in a vast city in ways that would wipe out the special effects budgets of many films. From the labyrinthine pipework to the luxurious parties that somehow still feel grubbier than the mist-coated streets, this is a visual feast of design. Kenneth Niemand imagines a city that never existed from the solid foundations of a world of iconic design: it's no surprise his original inspiration was a 1930s Henderson motorbike, and artist Dave Taylor has done a fantastic job of bringing it all to life. I highly recommend *Megatropolis*

to fans of Dredd, Noir, and Art Deco design; and if, like me, you're a fan of all three, then it's an absolute triple lock.

Greyscale

Sarah Gordon
www.gumroad.com/sarahgordon
Pb, pp250, £16 / Digital, pp250, £10

One of the most interesting aspects of reviewing comics is seeing how different writers and artists use technology to find new ways of combining pictures and words to tell stories. *Greyscale* is not the first comic to use Instagram as a platform, but it's one of the best I've seen. By combining multiple photos in one post, with Instagram's ability to add small animations, it offers an enjoyable and engaging reading experience.

The comic itself is based around (unsurprisingly), greyscale artwork, with each episode featuring up to 10 panels, and touches on many foretold topics that will appeal to *FT* readers. The main character is an unshaven Grey, working as a private investigator in Kent and investigating strange phenomena. There are racist ghosts, reincarnated police, and mysterious things under the English Channel, not to mention séances and spirits. Underlying the compelling storytelling is a strong vein of humour, helping deliver a comic with plenty to say about modern Britain while revealing in the some of our favourite strange phenomena.

Did You Hear What Eddie Gein Done?

Harold Schlecter, Eric Powell
Albatross Funnybooks, 2021

Hb, pp224, £26.99, ISBN 9781949889048

True crime, particularly true crime focused on one of the most infamous cases of the 20th century, is never going to be an easy read. It's fair to say from the outset that *Did You Hear What Eddie Gein Done?* (*DYHWEGD?*) is not going to be for everyone. Yet, in its presentation of the Ed Gein story, it doesn't feel sensationalist. Beginning with the cultural

impact of the case, a theme it circles back to, *DYHWEGD?* goes into the background of the family, particularly the personality of Gein's mother, and how those childhood experiences influenced, and maybe created, the person he became later. Throughout, the black and white artwork gives the story a considered feeling. Within the 220 or so pages, Schlecter and Powell bring in many different perspectives on what one newspaper man describes as the "creation of a boogeyman" – a creature straight out of folklore to terrify the children.

The artwork throughout is accomplished, capturing the personalities and emotions of the people involved in the story, but doesn't shy away from the more visceral aspects of the story. Two sections really play with comic form. The first draws on the EC Comics that caused such a moral panic in the 1950s; the second echoes, in the most grotesque (though artistically accomplished way) the dance numbers of musicals of the time.

The comic comes complete with notes and several appendices, which include factual sources for some of the story, as well as interviews with people involved in the case.

DYHWEGD? deals with some pretty disturbing subject matter – including the media fall-out around this notorious

serial killer and the cultural impact of the case – but it covers all these aspects extremely well.

E: A 24 Hour Comic

Naan

Online at: <https://belinconnu.jadinehonestudios.com/the-being-e/comic/>

Doing anything in 24 hours is a challenge. To put together a comic (layout, storyline, artwork.) is an achievement that deserves respect. The trick is that there needs to be a coherence, and that is exactly what Naan has achieved with *E*. The comic opens with the protagonist experiencing intrusive thoughts, perfectly rendered as black panels containing white text, while they progress

through a computer game character design-type set-up, choosing their features, body shape and clothes.

The storytelling here is strong, building steadily throughout the comic. By the time of the final reveal, Naan has created within the reader considerable empathy for the main character.

When taking on a challenge like a 24-hour comic, the temptation must be to keep the formatting straightforward and to simplify things, but here Naan experiments with layout, panels, text and colour. It's a heartfelt comic that is well worth picking up.

Dark Side of the Moon

Art and Script by Blutch

Europe Comics, 2021

Kindle & Comixology, 56pp, £6.49

Let's get the obvious out of the way at the beginning of the review: *Dark Side of the Moon* comic has nothing to do with British rock bands. This is a surreal, sometimes bawdy, often complex comic set in a strange near future. The whole planet is run by a single company – The Orifice – responsible for an unusual machine into which workers place their hands with no real knowledge of what they are working on.

The comic opens with Liebling, one of the main characters, being given advice by her mother, then follows her as she takes up a new role at The Orifice. The story then switches to Lantz, a writer responsible for the highly successful "New New Testament", a comic that the whole economy depends on.

The artwork has nods to pulp, with a huge amount of attention to expression, and the use of colour enhances the storytelling – with characters in some scenes being depicted without any colour at all. The technology depicted will appeal to Cronenberg fans. Timezones intertwine, characters find themselves in disturbing situations... and above it all sits The Orifice.

It's an unsettling, complex, read that depicts uncertainty, doubt, relationships, and occasionally brutality with a sense of weirdness perfect for fortians.

Children of the Revolution

A third season of the foul-mouthed, violent and bracingly bonkers take on the Romans in Britain offers up changes aplenty and another tasty soundtrack of folk-pop classics



Britannia Season 3

Created by Jez Butterworth, UK 2021

Acorn Media, £24.99 (DVD)

The outrageously brilliant series about the Roman invasion of Britain (reviewed [FT392:66](#)) has now reached season 3 – or, as the title has it, *BritannIIIa*.

Teenager Cait (Eleanor Worthington Cox), the Chosen One in Druid prophecies that she would unite the British tribes against Rome, has moved way beyond her maverick teacher Divis's training and has become toughened, self-assured and at times fierce. Threatened by someone, she grabs him and says: "Now turn around and walk away with both balls"; he does. She encounters General Aulus's former *Præfectus* Lucius (Hugo Speer), now a renegade, and learns more of the spear that he used to end the life of an unnamed man on a cross outside Jerusalem. And she forms an unlikely but brilliant alliance with Queen Antedia (Zoë Wanamaker), who is as stropic as ever.

Almost everyone's status has been undermined. The former Canti prince Phelan (Julian Rhind-Tutt), now renamed Quant, is an apprentice Druid (and as wet as ever), under the unsympathetic training of the outcast Divis (Nikolaj Lie Kaas). Former Canti queen Amena (Annabel Scholey) is under Aulus's thumb

Expect a lot of swearing, a lot of brutal killing and outstanding acting

as his mistress; former Regni queen Antedia is now a skivvy to a motley crew of ex-Roman soldiers; while Druid leader Veran (Mackenzie Crook) seems about to breathe his last, after Cait slashes his throat in the first episode.

But the biggest change is in Roman General Aulus Plautius (David Morrissey), almost the only historical character in *Britannia* (Steve Pemberton played the Emperor Claudius briefly in season two). Usually tough, arrogant, ruthless (yet charming), he is emasculated by the arrival of his wife Hemple, terrifyingly portrayed by Sophie Okonedo: "That is Aulus Plautius, an empty suit of armour, a put-on, wash-out, no-show, a vain, preening, disappointing, flabby, floppy failure." It's through Hemple that we learn the source of Aulus's power and the depth of his commitment and subservience to the god Lokka – horrifyingly, through human sacrifice and cannibalism.

To say any more would reveal too much. Expect a lot of swearing, a lot of brutal killing, a lot of betrayal (right through to the shocking end of the final

episode) and outstanding acting. Above all, it's great fun.

One of the many weirdnesses of *Britannia* is its music. The theme tune in season one was Donovan's "Hurdy Gurdy Man" and in season two his "Season of the Witch"; this time it's T Rex's "Children of the Revolution", though Donovan isn't abandoned entirely; his rare and beautiful "River Song" appears in one episode. Other music includes the Zombies' gorgeous "Time of the Season", songs by Blind Faith and Ten Years After and a lovely version of "Wild Mountain Thyme". I want the soundtrack album of the whole series!

Will there be a season four? The ending, with its increasing Christian references including the chilling "One of them will betray you", is climactic – but whether it's *The End*, or it presages a major shift in future direction, there is, at the time of writing, no word.

David V Barrett



Repeat

Dir Grant Archer, Richard Miller, UK 2021

On digital platforms.

Repeat is a modest but highly effective British sci-fi thriller which takes a simple premise and develops it into a mind-bending idea of which I think Philip Dick would have approved.

Ryan Moore (Tom England) is a university lecturer whose marriage is failing because of the stress brought about by his daughter's recent disappearance. Throwing himself into his work, he has discovered what he believes to be a scientific method of contacting, and speaking to, the dead. It genuinely works, if only for a brief period. To lengthen the time available to converse with the departed, Ryan's equipment needs to be powered by a toxic substance that is kept locked away on the university campus.

Realising he may be able to solve the mystery of his daughter's disappearance by contacting her via his breakthrough, Ryan starts stealing the material and working with it at home.

I won't say any more about the story because there are juicy twists and turns along the way, and as this is a film I can heartily recommend I don't want to rob it of its impact. What I will say is that the fantastical central idea is contrasted well with the reality of a strained marriage, the day-to-day life of a university, and other details that ground the film in a recognisable world. Similarly, it doesn't rely – no doubt for budgetary reasons – on big special effects to entertain. Instead, the story drives the film forward – less common these days than you might think. Ryan's discoveries are simultaneously *our* discoveries; the film doesn't play games with the audience by withholding revelations to keep us in the dark, and instead the viewer learns things about the story at the same time as the characters do.

With a limited budget the seams do show occasionally: the acting can be a bit clunky, but the leads are fine. I can't say I was familiar with most of the cast, which explains why the only name I did know – former *Eastenders* and *Strictly* star Nina Wadia – features prominently in the promotional material despite having only about five minutes of screen time.

Ultimately, *Repeat* provides what we all want from a film: a strong story, grippingly told, and a barnstorming climax. With cinemas dominated by movies costing up to half a billion dollars, this is a useful reminder that fantasy films can be made for a tiny fraction of that and still deliver the goods effectively.

Daniel King





TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current forteen offerings



Celebrity Ghost Trip

It had to happen. All it takes is for a producer to drink too much wine, binge on some reality TV and the unreality of paranormal TV and then put two and two together and make 666. If you take *Coach Trip* (a camp exhibitionist called Brendan takes a busload of other camp exhibitionists around playing games until they are whittled down to two) and combine it with *Most Haunted* (camp exhibitionists shrieking in lowlight; see FT342:54-55), *Celebrity Ghost Trip* (C4) is the result.

Brendan introduces us to the contestants: David and Callum, "stars" of *Ibiza Weekender* (me neither); Dick and Dom of *in*

da Bungalow fame; Chloe and Nicole from... I don't know, something on Netflix; rapper Graft with chum Sian who didn't win *The Apprentice*; and professional TV celebrity Kerry Katona with daughter Lily (who practises Wicca). They waste no time in heading to Alnwick to meet spiritualist painter Pauline, who immediately starts channelling Derek Acorah with residual vagueness: "I'm seeing a man in a top hat and

"I'm seeing a man in a top hat... by the fire... with a pipe called Dave"

slippers... by the fire... with a pipe called Dave." The "pipe called Dave" is an intriguing detail. Graft tries to contact Michael Jackson (spoiler: he fails). This actually proves quite useful, as we soon learn that Dick and Dom are the only couple with any trace of critical thought.

To Chillingham Castle next, for a ghost hunt. Investigators Lindsay and Lee show us their instruments, which are "already going off", and we meet Elizabeth the haunted doll who scratches married men (look, I'm just writing this down, alright?), and off they go into the lowlight in two groups. Kerry namechecks Yvette Fielding as she and Dick and Dom, now in da chapel, listen as Lindsay recites the Devil's Prayer, the EMF meter goes loopy, they all shriek and get out of there. Meanwhile in another part of the castle, the other group hear a clock go ding, the EMF meter goes loopy, they all

shriek and get out of there and David – or possibly Callum – wees himself a bit.

Then comes the vote, and inevitably Dick and Dom get the yellow card for their scepticism; however, as compensation they get to nominate another couple to stay the night with Elizabeth the haunted doll. The already haunted-looking Kerry gets the gig. She is unimpressed, as are I imagine any of the audience who'd remained sober, and it'd be interesting to see what the next night's viewing figures were. I tuned in out of professional duty, to see teen-fave Tinchy Strider and Linda Lusardi (teen fave for another generation, for other reasons) join the travellers. They make potions, they go somewhere else in lowlight, the EMF meter goes loopy, they all shriek and get out of there, rinse and repeat. If you like watching exhibitionists scream, then knock yourself out.

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

I like to think of myself as fairly well versed in horror films and B-movies. Heck, last week I watched the ultra-rare, shot-on-video *Black River Monster* from 1986 – a home-made Sasquatch movie financed purely to showcase a horse ranch for girls in Michigan. Yet every now and then I'm sent something to review and my immediate thought is: "How have I never seen this?" This month, it happened three times.

How I have managed never to see *Dementia 13* (1963) is a mystery, since it's the very opposite of obscure. A copyright snafu landed it (along with *Carnival of Souls* and *Night of the Living Dead*) in the public domain, which is why you'll find these movies in every bargain-bin DVD collection on

the planet. Yet still, it passed me by. Finally exposed, I was quite impressed with this twisty, gothic melodrama about a woman convincing her drowned husband's family that he's still alive. First time director Francis Coppola proves a dab hand at brooding castles, misty lakes and axes to the face. It all looks nice and crisp in this HD presentation; maybe the movie gods saved me from seeing this on a grainy, Poundland DVD version years ago.

The next admission is going to lose me serious street cred with my generation, but here I stand and I can do no other... I had never seen *The Wraith* (1986). Sure, the VHS cover art is etched into my memory: a cool looking, helmeted robot type in front of a kick-ass space

The VHS cover art showed a helmeted robot in front of a kick-ass space car

car. The film itself is a trip, with a fresh-faced Charlie Sheen exacting vengeance on a gang of dictionary definition 'movie-punks'. But this is no ordinary kid. He can turn into flying lights and for some reason, only kisses Sherilyn Fenn on the top lip. Sane-at-the-time Randy Quaid plays the gherkin-hating sheriff while Clint Howard is fab as the gang's mechanic, complete with *Eraserhead*/ *Evilspeak* hair. It's packed with retro songs and car chases, one of which sadly killed a crew member.

Not only had I not seen our last choice, I'd barely heard of it. This is my loss, because I thoroughly enjoyed *Sundown: Vampire in Retreat* (1989), a

film about reclusive, abstinent vampires setting up a blood substitute factory in a remote desert town. Along with high factor sun-block and groovy shades, they hope for a new, peaceful chapter in human/vampire relations. Yet others in the town want to return to 'the old ways'. I loved the stop-motion bats and wooden stake bullets, but there are moments of depth too – like when vampires discuss their hopes for redemption and being tired of murder. "Where did I find you?" one asks another. "You were crying in the Pyrenees after killing a 10-year-old boy."

The cast is a mix of character actors and Eighties soap and horror stars. Bruce Campbell is the bumbling ancestor of Van Helsing, while David Carradine brings left and heart to the head pacifist vampire. It's a charming, silly, inventive and surprisingly full-blooded movie. How could I have missed it, first time round?

THE HAUNTED GENERATION

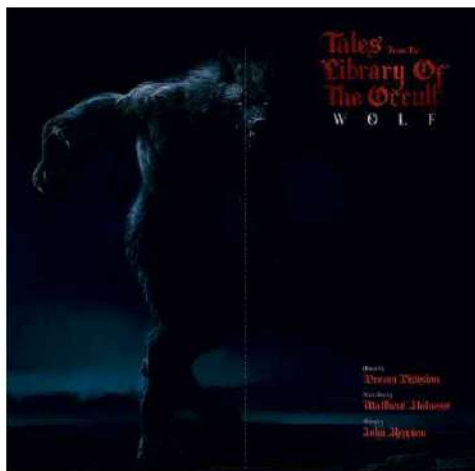
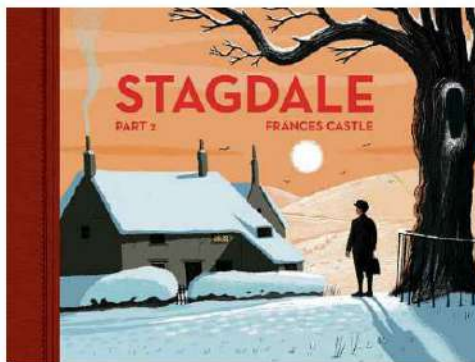
BOB FISCHER PRESENTS HIS FESTIVE ROUND-UP FROM THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY...

"As a child growing up in the 1980s, the threat of nuclear war was always present," remembers Dr Michael Mulvihill, "and the possibility of being given four minutes' notice of the world ending. RAF Fylingdales was built to provide that notice..."

Michael is the slightly implausible artist-in-residence at this beautifully windswept military base on the North York Moors. At the height of the Cold War, its iconic "golf ball" geodesic domes were built to detect incoming Soviet missiles, and these memories of lingering dread have inspired *Worldly Noise and Electronic Atmospheres*, a new album recorded by Michael and North-Eastern electronica wizard Chris Tate. "We wanted to capture the flow of electro-magnetic waves through equipment, and the invisible churn of radio frequencies over the moors," he continues. "The result hopefully speaks of a sense of threat, but also evokes the hills, the North Sea and the extra-terrestrial domain of low Earth orbit..."

Michael and Chris, recording as One Key Magic, have conjured an affecting album of stark, radiophonic ambience. It's the herald of a wider project to explore the base's fascinating history. "In the next few months we'll be launching the Fylingdales Archive, an online portal through which anyone will be able to explore the artefacts gathered by the base since it became operational almost 60 years ago," explains Michael. "These include consoles from the 'golf ball'-era space operations room, thousands of photographs showing the construction of the base, and an immersive sound archive of field recordings." In the meantime, the album is available from cruelnaturerecordings.bandcamp.com.

Also exploring the darker chapters of 20th century history is artist Frances Castle. Part One of her beautifully-illustrated multi-part graphic novel *Stagdale* (FT379:37) was set in the



summer of 1975, with disaffected schoolgirl Kathy struggling to adjust to a new life in the creepy, titular English village. It ended with her discovery of the lost diaries of Max, a young wartime refugee, and the freshly published Part Two is the touching story of Max's 1938 escape from Nazi Germany on the Kindertransport. "The story starts on Kristallnacht," explains Frances, "The Night of Broken Glass, when Nazi thugs smashed up Jewish properties and set fire to synagogues. Max's family are hiding in a cupboard, and narrowly escape."

In future instalments, the stories of these two children from contrasting eras will intertwine, with Frances taking inspiration from the wartime remnants that peppered her own 1970s childhood. "Near where I live, in Finsbury Park, there was still an anti-aircraft emplacement," she recalls. "And I remember walking to school in Putney, and in front of the shops they were digging up an old air raid shelter..." *Stagdale Part Two* – accompanied by an EP of Frances's own electronic compositions – is available from both claypipemusic.co.uk and thehardytree.bandcamp.com.

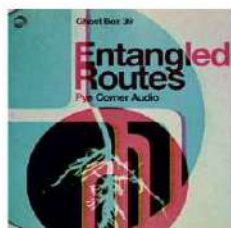
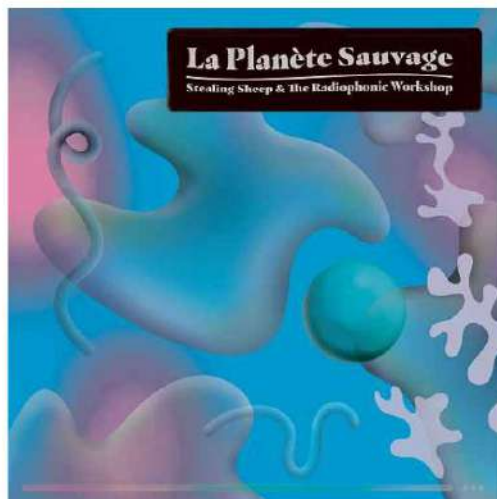
Delving into more supernatural realms are Black Channels, whose 2015 album *Two Knocks For Yes* is the subject of a spanking new vinyl reissue. Alarming recordings of chilling supernatural anecdotes ("The baby had been lifted out of the cot... she was sitting at the top of the stairs, half asleep") are woven into a terrifying soundtrack partly composed on a vintage Buchla Electric Music Box. It's a brilliant concoction by Brighton-based producer Simon James, and comes complete with a "Ghost Spotting Report Form" for more phantasmagorically-inclined listeners to record their own encounters. It's available from castlesinspace.bandcamp.com.

The label has also given a welcome first vinyl pressing to Mordant Music's influential

2005 album, *Dead Air*. Here, shadowy overlords Baron Mordant and Admiral Greyscale imprison veteran ITV continuity announcer Philip Elmore (and yes, it's really him) in a post-apocalyptic TV studio as the world collapses around them. Both darkly playful and woosily nostalgic, it's an almost overwhelming experience: head-throbbing soundscapes combine with the spectral echoes of regional idents as Philip loosens his kipper tie and recalls a fascinating career as both actor and announcer. Spoiler alert: There are mentions of *The Des O'Connor Show*, Dr Scholl foot plasters and a long-forgotten Michael Elphick milk advert.

And Philip isn't the only TV continuity man being pressed back into service. Before joining the Radiophonic Workshop in 1972, Roger Limb was a velvet-voiced BBC announcer and his dulcet tones are heard once again on *La Planète Sauvage*, a terrific collaboration between the esteemed Workshop (comprising, in this case, Roger, Dick Mills and newish recruit Bob Earland) and Liverpool art-pop band Stealing Sheep. It's a re-imagined soundtrack to the 1973 French animated feature of the same title, and its keyboard-heavy prog workouts, loose-limbed drumbeats and whizzy sound manipulations perfectly complement the film's heady, psychedelic sci-fi ambience. It's available from firerecords.com.

Prog-tinged, spoken word explorations of the uncanny are clearly in vogue. Tom McDowell, sinister czar of the Library of the Occult label, is planning a year-long series of short stories with different narrators and soundtrack composers, all written by Folk Horror Revival stalwart and sometime FT contributor John Reppion. With the umbrella title *Tales from the Library of the Occult*, they'll be issued monthly on 12" vinyl. January's instalment, *Wolf*, is soundtrack by Tom himself – in his guise as Dream Division – and narrated by *Possum* director (and actual Garth Marenghi), Matthew Holness. It's delicious retro terror, set in the winter of 1980 with appropriately squelchy synths, and will delight *Hammer House of Horror* fans. And for those who can't wait, I'd recommend – from the same label – *Blood Mansion*, a heroically psychedelic "erotic horror" soundtrack from Garden



Gate; aka Philadelphia-based Timmi Meskers. It's great. As is *Ascending Plume of Faces* by Kyron... that's João Branco Kyron of Ghost Box Records favourites Beautify Junkyards, here presenting a collection of delightfully unsettling electronic compositions inspired by the life of occultist painter Austin Osman Spare. To immerse yourself in this cavalcade of wonderful oddness, visit libraryoftheoccult.bandcamp.com.

Speaking of Ghost Box, their choice of Christmas single might lead to suspicions the label has been hitting the cooking sherry a little early. A cover of Madonna's 1987 chart smash "La Isla Bonita" seems unlikely territory for these founding fathers of the haunted scene, but in the hands of prog-fuelled heavy rockers Large Plants, it becomes a darkly psychedelic masterpiece. And brilliant B-Side "Please Don't Be There For Me" is equally heavy psych-rock, all twiddly guitars and folk harmonies. It's out now as a deluxe gatefold 7" single. Equally invigorating is the fourth album on the label by Pye Corner Audio, the recording pseudonym of Belbury beatmaster Martin



Jenkins. *Entangled Roots* is peppered with the sparse beats and spectral synths that have become his trademark, and is the perfect album for the turning of autumn into winter: an exploration of "mycorrhizal networks and human attempts to listen in and communicate". Mists and mellow fruitfulness abound at ghostbox.co.uk.

Meanwhile, two men with an insatiable desire to ferret have been as busy as ever. Jonny Trunk has spent the year celebrating 25 years of Trunk Records (and the anniversary compilation *Do What You Love* is a glorious mish-mash of vintage electronica, porn soundtracks and, erm... Mike and Bernie Winters), and has an exciting Christmas 7" lined up: Roger Webb's groovy theme to the early 1970s ITV anthology series *Shadows of Fear*. Head to trunkrecords.com. And Alan Gubby's Buried Treasure label marks its eighth birthday with *Octocorallia*, a fabulously varied collection of rarities and unreleased tracks from the cream of electronic experimentalists – including Drew Mulholland, Howlround, and Alan's own dark, psych-tinged outfit Revbjedle.

And he promises a busy 2022 schedule, including an omnibus edition of his graphic novel series *The Delaware Road*, a darkly twisting tale of radiophonic occultism. Best keep an eye on buriedtreasure.bandcamp.com.

And if anyone fancies a breath of fresh air (or, indeed, an unsettling lungful of fetid air from some desolate vista) over the festive period, then surely a trip to St Barbe Museum and Gallery in Hampshire is in order? It's playing host to *Unsettling Landscapes*, an expansive collection of artwork inspired by the more disquieting aspects of the English countryside. Subtitled *The Art of the Eerie*, it gently guides visitors through almost a century of pastoral unease, from the twisted, post-war paintings of Paul Nash and Edward Burra to the 21st century illustrations of Stanley Donwood and Julian House. It has been curated by Steve Marshall, Gill Clarke and – in something of a coup – best-selling writer Robert Macfarlane.

"We split the exhibition into four themes," explains Steve. "Firstly, 'Absence/Presence'. Which goes back to the writings of Mark Fisher: his idea that we feel the eerie when something is present that shouldn't be, or when something *should* be present but is missing. Secondly, 'Unquiet Nature': the idea that nature isn't always comforting, it can also be threatening. There's an Edward Burra picture in the exhibition where all the twigs look like claws that might reach out and trap you..."

"Then there's 'Ancient Landscapes'. Places like Stonehenge and Avebury are amazing places that have a real presence, and we still don't *really* know what went on there. And the last theme, 'The Dying of the Light', is just about atmosphere: how light, and even the time of day, can make something seem eerie."

The exhibition runs until 4 January 2022, and a sumptuous hardback catalogue is also available. Find out more at stbarbe-museum.org.uk, and it might be best to pack your wellies.

Visit the Haunted Generation website at www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk, send details of new releases, or memories of the original "haunted" era to hauntedgeneration@gmail.com, or find me on Twitter... @bob_fischer



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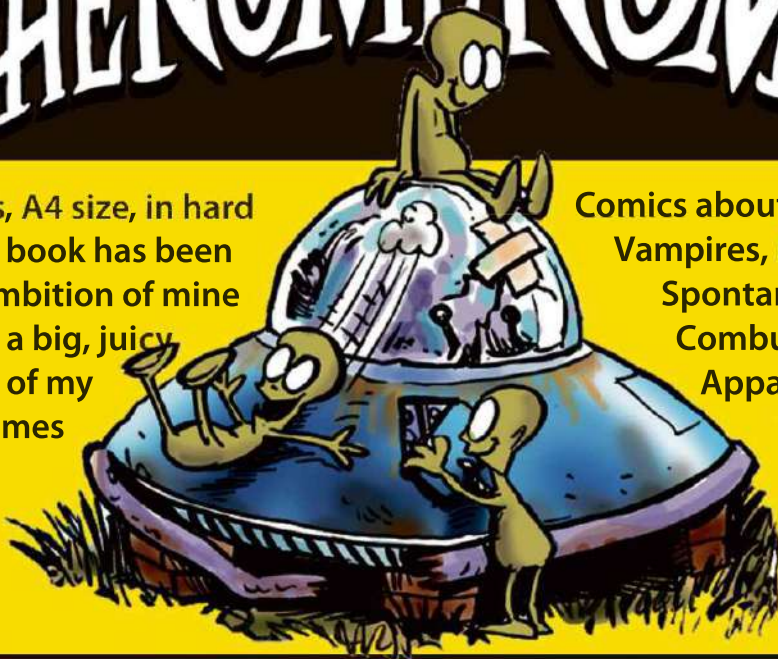


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Afterlife

Regarding Scott Wilson's letter about the Other Side ['Burning question', FT411:72]: there are several problems with the point he makes. Even if there are some genuine mediums, they are human beings, and might have reasons to lie about the religious aspects of the afterlife. They themselves might not even be sure. What's more, mediums cannot be certain that the spirits they speak to are (a) really dead human beings and not deceptive spirits or demons; or (b) actually telling them the truth.

Without even going into laws or strictures which might restrain the dead in their communications with us, we are still left in the same position of uncertainty familiar to us.

I think that if any medium is real, (s)he wouldn't be one of those charging for services, but if there is any reality to communications from Beyond, there is definitely some deliberate system in place to keep us from ever being certain of its reality. The practicality of this should be apparent; we would all manage our lives very differently if we had certainty of (and knowledge of) an afterlife.

Dean Teasdale

Gateshead, Tyne & Wear

Distorted perception

The third witness to the Brumby Wood incident [FT411:51] was very telling in her response as her insight shows how a lot of people filter reality through belief (it must have been a white or grey figure because that is what colour ghosts are). In other words, she initially dismissed her own experience of the figure being black because her prejudice told her that spectral figures are not that colour.

Imagine this in a courtroom or when giving witness statements to the police. You saw what you saw but your own mind twists the evidence according to your beliefs about reality. The trauma itself can distort memory, but then you have this on top of everything. No wonder the police go over statements again and

SIMULAGRA CORNER

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to sieveking@forteanimes.com



While out doing Alien Big Cat research and to retrieve a trail cam in Caithness, Paul Manson came across what appears to be a baby woolly mammoth.

again, and also want to interview witnesses immediately after the incident, if possible.

Tony Sandy

By email

Spot Loggins

Regarding the "supernatural" ice cream called Spot Loggins ["Magic snack", FT410:72]: Spot Loggins was a 17th century cattle drover who drowned in an old well at Bretforton House Farm in the Vale of Evesham, Worcestershire. His ghost is celebrated every November at the local 13th century Fleece Inn nearby. The ice cream is very special – a family secret.

Valerie Bird

Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan

Subterranean legends

With regard to Phil Brand's letter about crocodiles swimming in the London sewers [FT409:76]: this mythology is referenced in Nev-

erwhere, Neil Gaiman's fantasy television series of the 1990s, the main relevant action of which, after the New York crocodiles are mentioned in passing, concerned the similar mythical animal survival story of a giant wild boar living under London, which the hero and his fellowship must later confront for the obligatory

climactic battle scene.

I recall that my chemistry teacher, Mr Downer of Thorpe Hall School, told us about a friend of his who worked for ICI, and who quit in disgust because he found out about "a lake of mercury" under one of the factories that was being ignored for

some obscure reason. I anticipate this will be dismissed as an urban legend.

James Wright

Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Gauguin's birds

I very much enjoyed Karl Shuker's article on mystery birds in Paul Gauguin's paintings [FT409:42-46]. I do have one small observa-

tion to make, however: he was noted for his experimental use of colours and ignored some colours altogether. Sometimes because he couldn't afford certain pigments he substituted different colours. My question therefore is – how much certainty can you place on the colour of his birds?

Dr Peter WH Smith

Watton At Stone, Hertfordshire

Karl Shuker replies:

Dr Smith makes a good point, but from what I can tell with the paintings in question, there are no glaring colour omissions anywhere in them, so it seems safe to assume that the colours that he used for the birds were their genuine ones, rather than substitutions.

Proverbial

I've enjoyed reading the Arthur C Clarke feature. In particular, I thought Ryan Shirlow coined a beautiful phrase that sums everything up fortene-wise: "It is difficult to dismiss the conclusion that normal people inconveniently experience the technically impossible." It should be put on a T-shirt or tea towel. Pd buy one.

Alex Whyles

By email

The Vinland Map

I can't help wondering whether the Vinland map [FT411:6-7] was, in effect, a "weapon" in the propaganda war between those who still feel that Christopher Columbus was the true European discoverer of America and those who feel that the Vikings should be accorded that honour. The map could have been genuine – the Vikings definitely knew of those North American territories nearly 500 years before Columbus – but we now know that it was forged, probably in the 20th century, as your excellent article made clear. Other disputed Norse artefacts, the Kensington Rune-stone for instance, discovered in Minnesota within an area populated by Scandinavian immigrants and their descendants, might well be more of the same.

Geoff Clifton

Solihull, West Midlands



LETTERS

Post mortem calls

The article about phone calls from the dead [FT405:30-35] was fascinating. However, I was surprised that a famous and fairly recent incident was not mentioned. On 12 September 2008, a passenger train in Los Angeles crashed and several people were killed. A cell phone that belonged to a deceased passenger made over 30 calls to friends and family. The calls mysteriously stopped after his body was found in the wreckage.

Gregory Sumrall
Biloxi, Mississippi

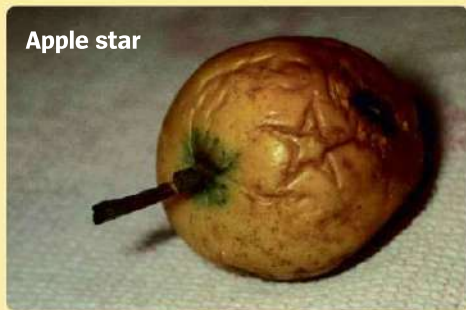
Bigfootage

I have to take issue with Ryan Shirlow when he says of the Patterson-Gimlin footage of Bigfoot: "This has been dissected thoroughly in FT over the years... and is widely believed by scientists to be a gorilla-suited hoax – one that doesn't even match the descriptions given by other witnesses. Participants in the charade have since come forward, but their testimony is itself disputed by other believers..." [FT410:32-39]

The Patterson-Gimlin footage has been accepted as genuine by Professor Jeff Meldrum, an anthropologist and leading figure in Sasquatch research, and many others. It is considered to be the best evidence we have of Sasquatch on film. Importantly, eyewitness Bob Gimlin has always held fast to his story (Patterson died long ago).

And Shirlow's statement that it "doesn't even match the descriptions given by other witnesses" is contentious. The Patty type of Sasquatch is only one of a number of different types seen in the US and Canada. Morphological differences may simply be down to circumstances of geography. The Florida Skunk ape is a very different beast from Patty, for example. Four types have been tentatively identified by veteran researcher and eyewitness Will Jevning, who worked closely with both journalist John Green and field researcher Rene Dahinden. I recommended publications by John Green, Grover

Apple star



I found this apple, bearing a star and the numbers 2791, in the garden of my old house in August 1990. The photograph wasn't taken until three weeks later, so the apple had begun



to deteriorate. According to my late father, the apple was analysed at a university laboratory and the findings were that the markings were caused by a fungus.

Rory Sheridan
By email

Krantz, Will Jevning and others. Or simply listen to one of the many excellent podcasts to get a flavour of what is out there, e.g. Sasquatch Chronicles, Dogman Encounters, Creek Devil, etc.

Nick Smith
Aston Clinton, Buckinghamshire

Occam's shortcomings

Michael Sherlock's assertion that "demonic" explanations violate a basic principle of investigation because Occam's Razor is a more reliable approach by which to determine truth [FT410:72] is not exactly in the forteen spirit, at least in my view. Occam's Razor certainly has its use, but also its limitations. There was a time when Occam's Razor took it for granted that our Earth is flat because it looked flat.

Having purchased a copy of Merrily Harpur's book *Mystery Big Cats* many years ago and read it thoroughly more than once, I can fully understand the rationality behind her arguments. That is what matters because an open mind is the bedrock of forteen enquiry. But humans are complex

creatures; for example, according to the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, one's political allegiance is determined less by social influences and more by genetics.

If correct, then that is a remarkable discovery for social science to have made, particularly in view of the fact that our increasingly politically polarised world sadly is allowing little or no room for differences of opinion. It seems that genetics also governs a predilection towards obsessive rationality. But at the other end of the spectrum, genetics also determines a predilection towards an interest in the paranormal or the unexplained. The ideal forteen position should be somewhere in between. So perhaps forteans, like witches, are born and not made!

Consequently, one should be suspicious of dyed-in-the-wool sceptics who masquerade as forteans. Perhaps as a consequence of their genetic blueprint these individuals are uncomfortable with ambiguity and crave the safe haven of certainty. And that is fine. Tolerance recognises and accepts diversity and I personally know a few of these types

who naturally gravitated towards humanism and joined rationalist societies. This is why we should be wary, if we can, of sound-bites and slogans. Their snappy conciseness can be dangerously seductive, not only both to shallow thinkers and deep thinkers, but also to the socially liberal and the socially conservative.

One example of such sound-bite simplicity is the statement that "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence", which is usually delivered with great conviction and accompanied by an air of smugness. The appeal of this particular fallacy is because often it tends to be true. If in the process of repairing one's ripped trousers in a field of haystacks the needle is lost, then one would be correct in saying that the absence of the needle is certainly not evidence of absence.

But if one then invokes the same maxim to argue that the absence of little green men on the Moon supports the hypothesis that such an exotic species inhabits the lunar surface, then that indeed is fallacious reasoning. The same can be said of an empty cupboard in your kitchen. If it is clearly empty then no amount of a Schrödinger's Cat argument will make it well-stocked. That is Occam's Razor at its sharpest.

John Chordman
Sheffield, South Yorkshire

Miles's musings

In reply to Geoff Clifton's letter [FT411:71], I think that von Däniken and his ilk were probably motivated by money rather than either genuine belief in ancient astronauts or a desire to shake up conventional historians. I recall in my teens lapping up von Däniken's works as a fascinating alternative theory, along with thousands of others, and I am sure we significantly contributed to his wealth. However, when his 'findings' were refuted and explained by genuine experts, I became disenchanted with the genre.

● Further to the sideline Vernacular Mapping [FT411:8], there is a phone app called What3Words that has assigned a



three-word 'address' to every 3m (10ft) square on the planet. The app will give you your location, so you can inform the emergency services.

● Regarding the item about the possible evolution of beards to protect faces [FT411:9], I believe this is unlikely. Firstly, I assume that punching someone on the jaw is just as likely to damage your hand as your opponent's face; wouldn't you be more likely to give them "a smack in the mouth", or aim for the nose? Secondly, assuming a fight to the death (in order for evolution to be a factor), I think it would be more likely to involve weapons, so beards wouldn't be significant. Finally, potential beard growth varies according to ethnicity and/or climate, so I wonder whether our ancient African ancestors were heavily bearded before they migrated into colder climes.

● Reading 'Beyond the g factor' [FT411:14] reminded me of the conclusion I came to some years ago: Artificial Intelligence compares to Intelligence the way an artificial flower compares to a real one. It may look the same, but it doesn't work the same way. It takes human intelligence to write the code to create the AI machine's 'intelligence'. Admittedly, the AI machine might outstrip human capabilities, and probably does in terms of speed, chess playing etc, but I would contend that it will still just be a machine with no motivation to take over the world. However, it would rely on humans to instruct it, so if it was told to improve road safety, for example, it might decide that immobilising all the vehicles was the answer – but that would be our fault!

Dave Miles
By email

Religious dates

In his letter about religious festival dates [FT410:71], Gareth Medway claims that because Easter and Passover are movable feasts they cannot therefore commemorate actual historical events. Surely the



Postbox mystery

Knitted post box covers have been appearing in Marlborough, Wiltshire. No one knows who the mystery knitter is.

Phil Harwood, By email

point of Easter being a movable feast, as opposed to say Christmas, which always falls on 25 December, is because the Easter ceremonies are centred around Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The need to keep to these specific days requires the dates to change from year to year. What would be the point of having Easter Sunday, which historically was the day of the Resurrection, on a Tuesday? The Gospel accounts record specific days, not actual dates. That doesn't mean they are necessarily ahistorical.

Passover is a different matter. The Exodus from Egypt occurred so long ago that a precise date is impossible. Although some scholars have recently doubted whether it even occurred as described in the Bible, its persistence through the millennia adds weight to its historical veracity and importance. In any case, religious traditions can change over time. The actual date isn't necessarily the most important aspect. Sceptics from a modern scientific background frequently forget that religion is primarily concerned with communicating a spiritual message, not with recording dates, times and other things to satisfy archaeologists and historians.

Mike Sherlock
Limerick City, Ireland

Jack Robinson

Last Sunday (27 Sept 2020) I watched a player called Jack Robinson playing football for Sheffield United against Leeds and idly wondered about the origin of the saying "before you can say Jack Robinson". I thought particularly about a brilliant comedy sketch from the late George Carlin where he talks about this example and all manner of sayings with which humans have tried to label the passing of time (www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaR3sVpTB98).

Two days later, I was in a second-hand bookshop in Basel, Switzerland, in the very small English-language section. There I found *Lock, Stock and Barrel – Familiar Sayings and Their Meanings* (Past Times publishing, 1998). I opened the book at random, from a selection of 180 pages and hundreds of sayings, straight to the page with an explanation for the origin of Jack Robinson.

I continue to be amazed by, and wonder at, these random (or not?) occurrences, but most of all they are just plain fun!

Duncan Kaiser
Pfeffingen,
Switzerland

Fancy Fowl

In the fascinating article "Voices from the Pageant" [FT405:40-47] and again in a footnote to this ["Merrill addendum", FT407:68], Eric Hoffman makes reference to the significance of the peacock as a symbol in the work of James Merrill and as the chosen shape of the fallen angel eventually dubbed Mirabell. A peacock does indeed appear on the cover of Merrill's book *Mirabell: Books of Number* [FT405:43], but the image below it showing a framed antique bird print with the caption "Peacock on the wall at Stonington" shows a Painted (or Chinese, Golden or Rainbow) Pheasant. Pheasants and peafowl do both belong to the Phasianidae family, but are quite distinct in appearance. The framed image (given Merrill's financial status, I'm guessing it would be an original hand-coloured copperplate engraving) is plate 68 from George Edwards *A Natural History of Birds, Most of which have not been figured or described and others very little known*, published in London between 1743 and 1751. Edwards, a friend of Sir Hans Sloane and Mark Catesby, was a pivotal figure in ornithological history. He was, incidentally, the first person to describe (in *Gleanings of Natural History*, 1760) the wonderfully named Puffadder Shyshark. Edwards also described, from a specimen sent to him by the American natural historian William Bartram, the Northern ring-neck snake, subsequently given the name *Diadophis punctatus edwardsii* in his honour.

Gail Nina Anderson
Newcastle-upon-Tyne



It Happened to Me...

No impact

My dad and I were celebrating some of lockdown being lifted by trying out his new car on a trip to the Cotswolds. It was late on a blustery night when we slowed down in Chipping Norton, on the Oxfordshire borders with Gloucestershire, to navigate the roundabout in a 20mph (32/kmh) zone at the junction between the A44 and the road to London.

It was then we saw it: something about the size of a large dog ran out right in front of the car less than a couple of inches from the bumper, giving us no time to brake or stop. But there was no bump, no impact, nothing at all. While it was going on I let out a "Hey, look out!" and spun round to discover what we'd hit, seeing nothing at all in the rearview mirror, or on the road behind or around us. My dad, meanwhile, was saying disbelievingly, "You saw it too?" as if he thought he'd imagined it. Clear as day (or clear as streetlight), the thing had been about 3ft (90cm) high and black, but insubstantial, semi-transparent, looking precisely like black ink swirling in water, and, I kid you not, flickering and contorting wildly – a black shape moving quickly and phasing rapidly in and out of our dimension is the best way I can describe it.

That roundabout is very well lit by bright, modern streetlights and that stretch is very clear, even at midnight, and also has extra lighting from the petrol station next to it. There was no mistaking what we saw running out in front of us – we just assumed we had to be mistaken because of its weirdness. We immediately went round the roundabout and back to look, trying to explain it in terms of flickering shadows on the road cast by the streetlight through leaves – or black bags, coils of bird meshing, or a dog that had been lucky enough to duck under the car and not get hit. But the road was empty,



pavements clear, the shadows distinct, no bags, dogs or meshing.

Ms Tansy Kelly Robson
By email

Bag or dog?

I read with interest Simon Young's article on the paucity of shape-shifter reports in recent years (**FT389:27**), so I thought I might add my own small possible sighting, which happened around 2012. I was a passenger in a car driving along the A44 between Bromyard and Leominster in Herefordshire. As we approached a long farm track on the left, I noticed what seemed to be a large black bin bag about a foot and a half [46cm] off the ground flapping wildly in all directions as if it were being attacked by multiple strong winds. Although it was around 100 yards down the track, there were no hedges and I had a very clear view. As the car passed the end of the track, the 'bin bag' suddenly resolved itself into an extremely large black dog, which began walking down the track towards the road. At this point I had turned around in my seat, but the car was already too far down the road

to see any more.

The whole event only lasted a few seconds and I may have mistaken a perfectly normal bin bag for a dog, or vice versa, but the whole experience had a sense of oddness to it. From the second I noticed the black moving shape, my brain seemed to register that something 'wasn't right', and the images have stayed clear in my mind ever since. The outline of the dog was very distinct from the bin bag shape and I remember puzzling over how I could have confused a bin bag flapping above ground for a lone dog walking down a clear track. Incidentally, there was no sign of a real bag once the dog appeared and I don't recall any trees or fencing etc that a bag might have been caught on, although I am not certain of this. It was also rather unusual to see such a large dog walking on its own in the countryside towards a busy road with no sign of an owner.

Alison Wragg
Kerry, Powys

Events in Kent

In the late 1970s I was a teenager living in Swanley, North Kent, and had a Saturday

evening paper round in the nearby village of Crockenhill. Returning home one early autumn evening, I was cycling on the section of the B258 with embankments either side that ran between Green Court Road and the bridge over the A20. At the base of one of these and on the opposite eastern side of the road I saw in front of me a large dog walking in the same direction I was travelling. It was a muddy grey brown colour; its fur was short but slightly rough, and it was about the size of a large Labrador but much leaner in build. It was clearly illuminated by the streetlights and remaining daylight. There was no one with it. As I drew closer, our local bus (the 477) was coming up behind me. As it swung out to overtake, its headlights went across to where the dog was walking and the dog quickly faded and disappeared. After the bus had gone, I stopped and walked across to where I had last seen the dog, but nothing was visible. Having assumed it was a real dog when I first saw it, I never 'felt' anything, even after I watched it fade away.

In contrast I had a real feeling of fear but saw and heard nothing when deeper in the Kent countryside a couple of years later. On entering a small wood to relieve myself, I was struck by an acute sense of something unpleasant centred on some bumpy ground towards the centre of the wood. I made myself walk through the wood and on leaving the other side the feeling disappeared. Returning back the same way, the feeling of oppression returned, very like that of being watched by something that wanted to cause harm, but suffusing the whole wood.

If you happen to enter a wood some miles south-west of Ashford and not far from where a railway crosses a road, and feel something unpleasant, then do write in.

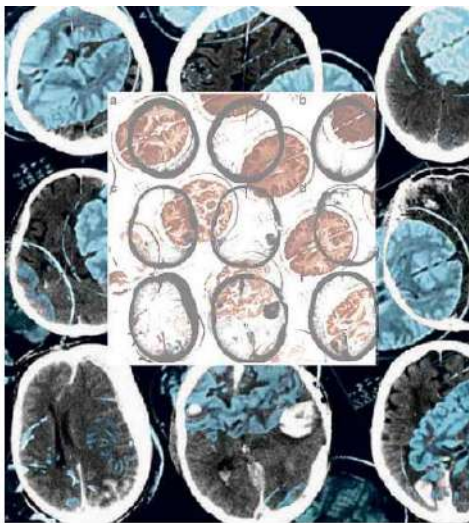
Andrew Long
By email

Buyer Beware!

My family and I moved into a new-build property (ignoring my gut feeling it was a bad idea), in July 2020. From the outset, we were plagued by a feeling of being watched and, if alone in the house, feeling that someone else was there. One night, I was taking the bins out to the bin storage area when out of the corner of my eye I saw something totally black, humanoid-shaped, flitting near my car on the drive, like an inky black shadow. At the time, only a few of the houses were occupied and the one streetlight that we had (the house is in a cul-de-sac) had not been connected up so it was dark. The sighting was accompanied by a really horrible feeling of dread – not fear, but dread – as if something awful was about to happen. I saw this ‘thing’ again later on, by a neighbouring garage. It lingered for five seconds or so then disappeared.

A week or so later, my family and I were sitting enjoying a meal at the dining table in the kitchen/diner area just off the hallway when we were all aware of movement in the hallway. The kitchen door was open and we heard a sound as if someone were walking past. We all stopped eating and looked at each other. On investigation, there was no one there, just the unmistakable feeling of a presence and the familiar heavy sense of dread and foreboding. Research didn’t uncover any historical reason for this black shadow’s appearance, no tragedies in the past etc. The estate of new houses was built on farmland.

Could this be some kind of human manifested thought-form? This estate and the two others planned for the locality have not been embraced by locals; there has been fierce opposition to the proposed plans. Fordingbridge in Hampshire doesn’t have the infrastructure to manage the additional cars and people with the extra 300 or more homes planned – not to mention the trees that are cut down and the land overturned, then redesigned using block paving and tarmac. Imagine the angry thoughts that are



“The sighting was accompanied by a horrible feeling of dread”

being directed either consciously or unconsciously at this and the other estates. I am planning to move out in a few weeks. I have not felt right since I moved in. If anyone can shed any light on this, I’d love to hear about it.

Alison Crocker
By email

Headbanger

I’m 56 years old and this is my history of head injuries.

1. Aged about four, I fell off a gate head-first onto sharp gravel stones requiring stitches on the right side of my head.
2. Aged about six, I tripped and fell off a low wall onto my head at Rhyl, North Wales. Concussed.
3. Aged about 10, on a camping trip with the cubs in the 1970s, one of the older lads picked me up and dropped me headfirst WWF style. Concussed.
4. Aged about 14, having a stone fight at a derelict farm, I was hit on top of my head by a piece of slate, requiring stitches.

5. During another stone fight at a derelict farm around the same time, I was hit on back of my head by a half brick. The guy who hit me was on my side.

6. On another occasion at the same derelict farm, I fell through the roof, jarring my neck.

7. A gang of kids was chasing my brothers and me. I hid where no one could see me, but was hit on the top of the head by a large stone the size of a golf ball. That one hurt.

8. My elder brother held me in a headlock and punched me straight in the forehead, causing a lump about the size of a golf ball. That hurt as well.

9. Out playing on ice and snow, I fell back slamming my head on the pavement. Concussed.

10. Aged 15, cutting open a golf ball with a breadknife, as you do, it exploded straight into my eye.

11. At the same age I went to watch Wrexham v Swansea. While walking back to the railway station with about 25 mates, two blokes jumped me and kicked the shit out of my head. Broken nose and concussion.

Then there is a break of a few years till I started work in a factory making aircraft parts.

12. Aged 33, on a Friday the 13th, I bent down to pick up some drilling tools and smashed the top of my head

into a metal girder. Blood everywhere. Taken to hospital and had the wound glued.

13. Also aged 33, a G clamp flew off a drilling operation and hit me on the head in exactly the same place as the last incident.

14. Aged 34, I was hit on the back of the head by some hardened paint the size, shape and weight of a hockey puck. This came out of nowhere and was thrown by someone aiming at someone else.

15. I banged my head numerous times while in this job. No one else seemed to.

All quiet since I changed jobs about 20 years ago, though I was hit on the hand by a piece of house brick in Barmouth about 15 years ago. The weird thing is with incidents 1 to 11 my older brother was always present. In some cases he was actually involved, but in most of them he was within 10ft (3m). He also nearly killed me by making me a cup of tea when I was about 15 but instead of sugar I got four teaspoons of salt; another time, listening to the *Friday Rock Show*, he sneaked up and turned the volume up to 10. How my headphones flew!

Has anyone else had so many head injuries in their lifetime? I don’t know anyone who has had more than two or three.

Dave Humphries
By email

Three at once

On a walk above Walton colliery nature reserve near Wakefield, West Yorkshire, in mid-June, my wife (who will admit she doesn’t have the greatest eyesight) suddenly exclaimed: “Oh look, a four-leaf clover!” As she bent to pick it up, she found another. As I bent down to have a look, I immediately spotted a third nearby. I checked the other plants to see if it was actually clover and all others appeared to have the usual three leaves. Having wasted a large chunk of the summer holidays as a child lying in the grass looking for four leaf clovers, I was almost annoyed to have found three at once when not even looking for one.

Jonny Forster
Wakefield, West Yorkshire

PECULIAR POSTCARDS



JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past records the curious exploits of French crocodile fancier Monsieur Auguste Pernelet

23. MONSIEUR PERNELET & HIS CROCODILES

Monsieur Auguste Pernelet was born in the 1860s. He became a traveller and naturalist, spending a good deal of time in Egypt and in the French colonies in North Africa. He took an interest in the Nile crocodiles, and imported a number of these animals into France to keep in his private aquarium. One day, a showman came to visit him, being greatly impressed by Pernelet's ability to control these fierce beasts. Pernelet even dared to climb into the aquarium to feed his pets a meal of fresh meat from his hand, as if they were a litter of puppies. Pernelet was offered £300 to show his crocodiles on the Paris stage, where he became very popular indeed. He went on to tour the provinces with his tank full of crocodiles. Once, in Algiers, he was attacked by a large crocodile when sitting on a chair in the aquarium, and lost his left forefinger, but this incident did not shatter his belief in the inherent docility of the crocodilian tribe.

In August 1902, M. Pernelet came to the Palace Theatre in London, to perform with his crocodiles. The animals were imported from Le Havre in their large glass and steel aquarium, and wheeled along Shaftesbury Avenue on a large trolley. Since no door to the theatre was wide enough to admit the aquarium, the writhing reptiles were carried inside one by one, muzzled by M. Pernelet; since it took nine strong men to carry the largest of them, the workforce was quite exhausted once the aquarium had been reassembled onstage. Even the blasé Londoners, used to various sensational shows and stunts, were astounded by Pernelet and his weird pets. He wore a pair of heavy sea-



I. Pernelet und seine Krokodile.

De passage à Stockholm.

P. Pernelet

ABOVE: A postcard stamped and posted in Stockholm in 1907 featuring Monsieur Pernelet and his crocodiles. **BELOW:** A postcard stamped and posted in Belgium in 1910, showing the two dead crocodiles after the fire. **FACING PAGE:** Two rare advertisement postcards from the Aquarium Indo-Africain in Brussels, featuring the heroic M. Pernelet.

boots to prevent the crocodiles from appropriating either of his feet, but otherwise used no protection at all. He held a chop of mutton between his teeth, and had a crocodile take it from him, fortunately without including any part of his face in the bite. He carried a smaller crocodile on his back, and ended the show by riding on the back of the largest specimen of all. A punning journalist was reminded of the 'Young Lady of Niger', of tiger-riding limerick infamy, but the dashing *dompteur* did not end up 'inside', emerging from the tank alive and well, to tumultuous applause.

M. Pernelet remained in London until early October 1902, performing with his crocodiles many times without any untoward incidents. He



later set up an *Aquarium Indo-Africain* in Brussels, well stocked with crocodiles, caimans and alligators. In January 1906, when performing with a circus in the Boulevard Jamar, he was bitten hard when feeding his pets, and lost two fingers of his right hand. Undaunted, he kept performing for several years

to come. The last we know of him is that in 1910 there was a fire at the circus where he was performing in Brussels; the indestructible M. Pernelet escaped unscathed, although two of his crocodiles perished in the flames, to be honoured with a postcard showing their charred remains.



Repas. Pernelet au milieu des crocodiles, d'après photographie



Pernelet, au secours ! — Tiens bon, me voilà

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874-1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term "teleportation", and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, FT is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. FT toes no party line.

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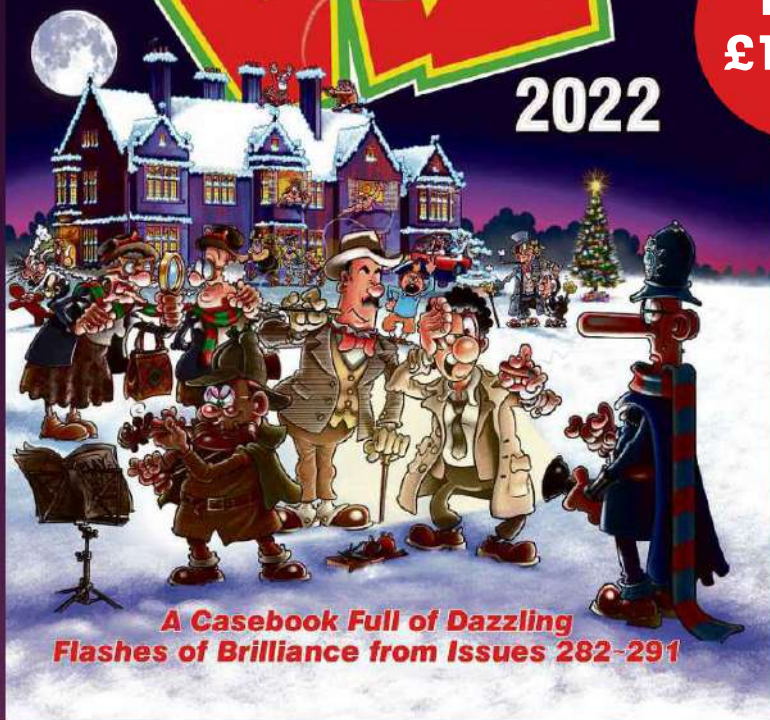
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JAMIE MOLLART KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD

THE EARTH'S RESOURCES ARE DWINDLING. THE SOLUTION IS THE SLEEP.

INSIDE A HIBERNATING CITY, BEN STRUGGLES WITH HIS LIMITED WAKING TIME AND THE DISEASE STEALING HIS WIFE FROM HIM. WATCHING OVER THE SLEEPERS, LONELY PERUZZI CRAVES THE FAMILY HE NEVER KNEW.

EVERYWHERE, DISSATISFACTION IS GROWING.

THE CITY IS ABOUT TO WAKE.



'THIS IS A FRIGHTENING, THOUGHTFUL VISION EXPLORING WHERE POWER LIES WHEN EVEN THE ACT OF BEING AWAKE IS REVOLUTIONARY'.

ALIYA WHITELEY, SHORTLISTED FOR THE ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD

'I WOULD LIKE TO SEE *KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD* MADE INTO A "CLI-FI" FILM, MARKED AS BOTH A CAUTIONARY TALE AND SATIRE'.

JULIET BLAXLAND, SHORTLISTED FOR THE WAINWRIGHT PRIZE

'A HAUNTING VISION OF THE NEAR-FUTURE WITH EXPERT WORLD-BUILDING AND RICH COMPLEX CHARACTERS, *KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD* KEPT ME GRIPPED FROM BEGINNING TO END'.

TEMI OH, WINNER OF THE ALEX AWARD

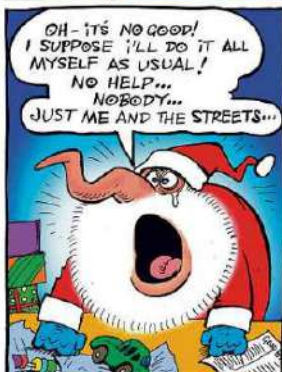
'MOLLART'S INTRIGUING AND TIMELY PREMISE IS EXECUTED WITH VERVE - *KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD* IS FILMIC IN ITS SCOPE'.

ALISON MOORE, SHORTLISTED FOR THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE

'*KINGS OF A DEAD WORLD* INTRIGUED ME WITH ITS TITLE AND HAD ME ON PAGE ONE. MOLLART'S DYSTOPIAN VISION IS AS DISTURBING AS IT IS BRILLIANT'.

GILES KRISTIAN, SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LANCELOT*

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FORTEAN TIMES 414
ON SALE 5 JAN 2022

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Farmer Paulo Celestino da Silva, 39, of Currais Novos, Brazil, was killed by a donkey that knocked him to the ground and tore out his throat with its teeth. Da Silva was found covered in bite marks and bleeding profusely from his neck near a donkey with its legs and mouth covered in bloodstains. Police Sergeant Antonyony said: "Paulo showed no signs of having been attacked by a human. It's been deduced that the donkey may have knocked him to the ground and then taken several bites out of him." *Metro*, 23 Aug 2021.

In late October, also in Brazil, an unnamed 30-year-old man and two friends went for a weekend fishing expedition to a lake in a rural area of Brasília de Mina. Once out on the lake the trio were attacked by a massive swarm of aggressive bees and, in an attempt to escape, leapt into the water and swam to the shore. Two made it, but the third did not, having been savaged by a shoal of piranha as he tried to flee the bees. The fire department were called to recover the man's body, eventually finding it 4m (13ft) from the bank, reporting that the fish had "torn open several parts of the body and tore open the right side of the face" causing him to drown.

While piranhas may not kill people quite as frequently as legend suggests, they are not, as is sometimes claimed, unfairly maligned vegetarians, and do seem likely to be responsible for some deaths, although it may be that their alleged victims drowned first and the fish then fed on the corpse. In 2015 a six-year-old girl in a canoe that capsized in the Maicuru River died after she had most of the flesh stripped from her legs by piranha, and Eduardo dos Santos de Sousa, also six, died in 2012 after piranhas ate his forearm near the town of Curua.

In fact, this new case is not the first time someone has died this way. Way back in 1979 (**FT30:13**) we reported the following: "A man who went fishing on the banks of the Amazon's Rio Negro was attacked by infuriated bees after he struck their nests while trying to free his line from a tree. To escape, he leapt into the river, where he was devoured by piranha fish". *BBC News*, 5 Feb 2015; *Tnews.com*, 3 Nov 2021.

Coroner James Aderley described the death of Jackie Cottrill as one of

the strangest he'd ever come across. Cottrill, 52, was found strangled in her kitchen in Blackburn after catching her pyjamas on the oven while making her nephew a bacon sandwich. She had fallen and her pyjama top had snagged on the lower handle of the oven and throttled her. "I can't explain how she ended up in this position – it's a very unusual case.

In my 20 years of doing this I have never come across this happening," said Aderley. Cottrill's daughter Sarah Ramsdale said: "Only she knows how it happened". *Metro*, 20 Aug 2021.

The resonantly named "Better Homes & Gardens Lavender & Chamomile Essential Oil Infused Aromatherapy Room Spray with Gemstones", sold by Walmart in the US, has caused at least two deaths as well as several non-fatal illnesses across Kansas, Georgia, Minnesota and Texas. The US Centre for Disease Control found that a batch of the spray contained the bacterium *Burkholderia pseudomallei*, which can cause a dangerous infection known as melioidosis if inhaled, consumed or enters the body through a skin wound. It is normally found in the soil and water of subtropical areas and is thought to have got into the sprays while they were being manufactured in India. In Kansas, an adult died of melioidosis caught from the spray and in Georgia a child caught a fatal infection from the substance. Walmart have recalled 3,900 bottles of the spray from about 55 of its stores and is offering \$20 (£14.50) gift cards to anyone that bought one. *theguardian.com*, 28 Oct 2021.

Amy Adams, 41, boarded a San Francisco BART train with her assistance dog at the Powell Street station. Just as the doors were closing, though, she changed her mind and jumped off, but her dog, which was attached by its lead to her waist, did not, and remained on the train, leaving the lead trapped in the car door. The driver, who had already done his safety inspection before Adams jumped off, did not see her, and started the train, pulling Adams under it and dragging her along, killing her instantly. Witness Mike Sim said there was "blood all the down the platform." Adams's dog was not harmed and was looked after by a passenger until the next station. *Metro*, 15 Sept 2021.



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